

ゲート

自衛隊
彼の地にて、
斯く戦えり

4. 総撃編

Illustration: 黒獅子

上

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GATE

Thus the JSDF Fought There!

(ゲート 自衛隊 彼の地にて、斯く戦えり)

Volume 07

All Out Attack

(1nd half)

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Story Description:

When a portal from another world appears in Ginza, Tokyo, a legion of soldiers and monsters emerge to attack the city. Thanks to their far more advanced weaponry and tactics, the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) easily repels the enemy, passes through the gate and establish a forward base of operations to force the Roman-styled empire of the other world to open peace negotiations. Yōji Itami is a JSDF officer sent to investigate the other world, where magic, dragons and elves are real, using his knowledge of fantasy stories to make his way in this new environment.

Original Story can be found here: [Link](#)

Chapter 1

The rippling green fields of wheat extended toward the horizon, and the expanse of virgin land looked as beautiful as a painting.

That said, this lovely scenery was scarred by black lines, as though the artist's hand had slipped or his passions had raged out of control.

Villages burned, and the smoke rose.

Staff Sergeant Tomita of 3rd Recon watched the roiling black smoke in the distance. It made him think of a mighty dragon soaring toward the clouds. However, it had been created from the sacrifice of the lives, homes and harvest of the peaceful villages. With this in mind, if one were to give this view a name, perhaps "Rise of the Evil Wurm" would be appropriate.

The large transport helicopter — a CH-47 Chinook — and its escorts practically scraped the roofs of the houses as it passed over the smoke-shrouded villages.

He watched the blaze beneath him devour houses and their furnishings with fangs of searing flame. It was accompanied by a loud crackling as the fires chewed them all to pieces.

The vegetation burned loudly, licked by serpentine tongues of fire.

However, this sound was mercilessly stamped out by the roaring of the Chinook's 4336hp turboshaft engines.

The forward and rear rotor blades tore the thick clouds of smoke apart, churning the air below them into a downwash and extinguishing the flames directly underneath.

The members of the JSDF Special Region Expeditionary Force's 403rd Squadron — who were not so much travelling with Tomita and the others as they were giving them a lift — looked silently upon the tragic sight below them.

The only people who continued speaking were the television news reporters.

They had not asked for anyone's permission before gravitating to the places with the best view, whereupon they trained their camera lenses on the village below them. The man with the microphone — Komurasaki — narrated the scene as if talking about secrets only he knew. He went on and on about plainly obvious facts like “there was a village here”, “the fire rises”, and “there are victims everywhere” as the smoke climbed lazily into the air.

As she watched this, Tomita whispered into the ear of Staff Sergeant Kuribayashi.

“When they said we would be protecting a member of the TV news staff, I thought it would be your little sister.”

“Hell if I know. We keep getting missions like these, does it even count as recon work any more?”

Their conversation was vaguely inappropriate for this scene. In truth, they were simply blowing off steam, so they did not exchange many words. Instead, they locked eyes, and shrugged helplessly.

“Lads, as you can see, this is a terrible sight. Our mission is to hunt down Zorzal's lackeys. We will find the main body of their forces and crush them without mercy. Got that?!”

The team members nodded in unison as they heard their sergeant major's bellowing. “We get you!”

“Good answer. Now load up!”

The members of 1st Team tapped their magazines against their helmets.

This was to ensure that the magazines — which contained 20 rounds of 7.62mm ammunition — were properly loaded. It was a small thing, but a rifle stoppage during combat could be a fatal matter. They were that careful because they were headed toward the battlefield, where the line between life and death was very fine indeed.

They loaded their Type 64 rifles with practiced movements. Sliding in the magazines, slapping them home, setting them to safe... the rifles they were holding transformed into savage instruments of murder in that

instant.

“Rounds loaded! Weapon safe!”

That said, the rifles did not sport any threat displays, nor did they crouch with their hackles up or growl in readiness to pounce, like hounds. The ice-cold blue-black steel did not look any different, whether or not it was filled with bullets. That said, if their index fingers applied more than 2.7 to 4.3 kilograms of pressure to the triggers, it would exceed the break pressure and cause the firing pin to strike the primer charge of a loaded round. The weapon would then obediently spit a chunk of murderous lead in the direction its user desired.

In that sense, the team members were much the same as those rifles.

Under normal circumstances, they were friends, husbands and sons. They were not martial artists like one might see on a television sports program. At a glance, little about them stood out to an observer. There was no way of telling who they were once they were no longer wearing their uniforms.

That said, once they held loaded weapons with the safeties off, they became famished wolves, seeking their prey. They advanced fearlessly to exterminate their foes, impelled by the trigger-pull of their orders.

The team members applied black vinyl tape to secure small, loose parts and reduce the noise they made before they slung their rifles onto their backs. Some of them also had civilian-made dart sights attached onto their weapons via jury-rigged mounts. They peered through them in the darkness of the Chinook, verifying their sight pictures before stowing their rifles.

One of the men standing by the side asked:

“Are these sights really useful?”

“Well, it’s like having a sighting post and a reticle, though they’re on the verge of being written off... I think.”

Now that the fighting had begun in earnest, the JGSDF higher-ups had permitted their servicemen to modify their weapons. Targeting optics were

one of them, as were barrel-mounted laser sights and foregrips.

The shadow of the second Chinook came to rest above the village square.

In the distance, one could see a Cobra attack helicopter hovering in mid-air, ready to support the JSDF servicemen on the ground.

Ropes unfurled to the ground, each of them as thick as those used in tug-of-war contests at school sports festivals, and the team leader lowered his upraised hands.

After that, the members of 1st Team fast-roped down, touching down one after the other.

The cameraman recorded their descent.

Beside him, Tomita and the others took aim at the ground, on guard against enemies who might attack the descending servicemen.

After the members of 1st Team had fast-roped down, the Chinook hurriedly reeled its lines back in and ascended once more.

In the quiet interior of the helicopter, Komurasaki turned toward the helmeted helicopter pilot.

“Oi, find a place to land. We can’t get down like this!”

The airman in the cabin looked troubled, but all he could do was smile and reply:

“Understood. However, we need to verify that the ground conditions are safe before landing.”

“That means we’ll miss out on the exciting parts, no?! Put us down right now!”

“Sure, we could do that... but do you know how to use this?”

The airman pointed to a descending line.

The most dangerous time for helicopters on the battlefield was the moment they landed or took off. Angled descent and fast-roping was used to minimize that particular risk. Naturally, this was not something that

one could explain to an amateur who was demanding, “do this now”, so the reason they did not descend was to protect the craft and to ensure the safety of the media crew. In the face of that, all Komurasaki could was mutter “it can’t be helped” between curses.

As Komurasaki and his cameraman looked longingly toward the ground, the Chinook slowly gained altitude. Once the pilot was sure that they were safely away from the ground, the helicopter hovered in the sky above the burning village.

The team members immediately fanned out in all directions the instant they touched down.

It looked as though they were in some kind of race, given the way they held their weapons while sprinting. They surveyed their surroundings, vigilant eyes aiming down the sights of their weapons.

Their crosshairs swept over doors, trees, anywhere that people might be hiding. However, they did not discover anyone living. All they saw were people collapsed everywhere; men and women of all species who might have been alive until recently. Their bodies were covered in slashes and stabs made by swords, or torn by wild beasts.

“Use the infrared scanner!”

Obeying the team leader’s orders, one of the team members took out a device that resembled a raygun from a science-fiction movie, and pointed it at the nearby trees and dark places.

This device could pick up the infrared radiation emitted by warm-blooded creatures, and thus discover anyone who was hiding.

Its primary purpose was a tool to find prey while hunting. It could pick up large beasts within 900 meters and bird-sized creatures within 20 meters. In addition, one could also use it to find casualties buried under rubble. However, this device was not standard issue — in other words, issued by the JSDF — but the personal property of the team members. Regretfully, in the tight-budgeted JSDF, one had to make up a shortfall of

personal equipment from one's own funds.

“Picking up thermals from everywhere, it's useless.”

It was a good piece of machinery, but the huge heat sources nearby had a large impact on its performance. The raging fires near the houses were the main contributor to that, and then one had to consider that the corpses scattered around were still warm.

“Cheh...”

If their technology was not effective, then they had to use their own eyes and ears to verify the truth.

In the end, the ability to observe their surroundings and notice the unusual was a core skill for these team members. This had been the case from antiquity. They had to hone these skills because no matter how far technology progressed, there were countless circumstances where said technology could not be used, or where both sides' equipment impeded or cancelled each other out.

The soldiers looked for survivors among the fallen even as they looked for traces of hiding attackers. However, the crackling of burning wood made it difficult for the men to hear cries for help. Even the crunching of their boots across the ground hampered their ability to sense the presence of the enemy, and it put them all on edge.

Still, the members of the team calmly controlled their breathing, and they followed up on even the slightest of changes as they steadily advanced. Their eyes moved with unhurried speed; they scanned, inspected and searched everywhere around them.

The sudden sound of gunfire rang through the village.

“What's going on?!”

A tense voice demanded a report over the radio.

The team members — so on-edge that they were practically bleeding — reacted swiftly.

They lowered their stances, and while some people looked in the

direction of the gunshot, others turned to other directions to prevent anyone from slipping past their eyes.

“Over there... they’re fleeing toward the south of the village!”

The warning was accompanied by the sound of scattered gunfire.

The radio reported the numbers and heading of the enemy. After receiving the team leader’s orders, the squad leaders brought their people to the south, where the enemy planned to flee.

Advance!

Heeding the hand signals of their leaders, the squads dispersed to await the coming of the enemy.

The enemies that had attacked the surrounding region recently did not look like Imperial troops. Since they conducted their attacks in clothes similar to those of the local farmers, there was no way to tell if they were Imperial soldiers or fearful peasants who had taken up their farming implements as weapons in fear of those soldiers. Thus, the members of 1st Team had no choice but to treat anyone pointing weapons at them as a potential enemy. No — even if they were unarmed, they still had to be considered as potential enemies.

“Anyone who runs is an enemy! Anyone who stands still is a well-disciplined enemy!” That line had been used in a war movie to mock the impossibility of reason on the battlefield, but the truth was, being able to retain one’s senses in the madness of the battlefield was abnormal. When one really thought about it, how could anyone rationalize the murder of a human being? Anybody who could calmly and logically take a life was probably more frightening than a madman. Thus, it was only natural to be driven by insanity on the battlefield, and it was those people who could not switch back from madness to normality who were considered mentally ill.

In addition, it had been a tradition that those people who did not identify themselves as friend or foe — as well as those who did not dress themselves as combatants — would not be accorded the rights of an armed combatant. Such behavior was deeply despicable, and hardly

anyone would raise an eyebrow at their summary execution if they were to be captured. Even the Geneva Conventions — to say nothing of the Hague Conventions — mandated that “open carrying of weapons” was the minimum requirement for such status.

Still, there were the bleeding hearts who took the side of those who violated those rules of warfare, and sympathized with those people who used the common man as shields, the weak who blended into the populace and fought the strong with underhanded means. People who used civilians for protection would normally be condemned and destroyed, but said bleeding hearts instead pointed their fingers at the soldiers who hunted them, calling them “murderers” and “cold-blooded animals”.

(TL Note: the JP term is 病的な潔癖症, lit. "cleanliness obsession", or cleanliness-oriented OCD. Probably refers to the moral guardians that want to keep their hands spotless and clean.)

Indeed, they were not here to call out the insurgents or flush them out, but to utterly annihilate them. Anyone who used innocent people as their armor deserved nothing but extermination, as though they were vermin like cockroaches or rats. Terrorists spread hatred and suffering, threatening order and reason with madness. They blurred the line between peacetime and wartime, which was a supremely despicable act. Normally speaking, one would blame those who hid behind civilians for involving them in the fighting.

That said, uniformed soldiers were compelled to play their part as flawlessly as possible.

The battlefield was a place where momentary misunderstandings and failures in judgement compounded with each other. To protect one's comrades and survive, there was one ironclad rule — “If it looks like an enemy, open fire”. However, soldiers were required to have perfect discrimination of their targets, as though they were killing machines. If they could not do that, they were criticized as being “flawed”.

In this way, soldiers were shot in the back by the ones who they were protecting. Their hearts filled with guilt, they were mentally defeated even

before facing the bullets and bombs of the foe.

The members of 1st Team saw what appeared to be merchants on a trading wagon, and trained their weapons on them. There were eight people in total, human beings of the Special Region.

As they began to pull back their triggers, the men hesitated.

There was the urge to turn these people — who might harm them and their comrades — into corpses, which could do them no harm. However, they were not that fatigued yet. With sheer force of will, they fought off that impulse, waiting for orders despite the dangerous circumstances around them.

“Halt!”

The members of 1st Team called out to the wagons with their broken command of the Special Region’s language that they had learned in Arnus, while covering the traders with their weapons.

Perhaps they did not hear it, or perhaps there was another reason, but the traders ignored the team members and attempted to break through. The squad leader let off a warning shot near a horse’s leg to frighten them into submission. A shell casing tinkled onto the ground, and the startled horse reared up on its hind legs.

The panicked driver pulled tightly on the reins to calm his horse down. After a great struggle to get the beast under control, he obediently put his hands up.

The goods wagon slowly ground to a halt.

The soldiers backed off to form a semicircle around the wagon. This was so that they would not get in the way of their comrades’ line of fire. Then, with the greatest of care, they trained their weapons on those people and ordered them off the wagon.

“May I know what you gentlemen want? We are travelling merchants; do you require anything?”

This humble and polite voice came from the man with the messy

moustache on the driver's seat.

The members of 1st Team took aim at his crotch.

Imperial soldiers were adept at the use of the sword and spear, and their defensive techniques were comparable to that of a skilled boxer. Thus, they were trained to respond quickly to attacks aimed at their heads and chests. However, the abdomen and groin could not move without the help of the legs. Thus, they had lower mobility, and were easier targets even in the heat of battle.

“Why were you fleeing?”

The squad leader began his interrogation while maintaining a separation of several paces.

The messy-moustached man seemed to be the representative of his group. He shrugged and replied:

“Is that not obvious?! We were passing by this village, and then we found smoke rising from it. We wanted to see what was going on, but then we discovered that the village was in this state. Nothing good will come of being involved with this sort of thing, so running away would make sense, right...?”

In short, the man was mumbling about how the village had already been like this when they had gotten there.

It was a plausible enough reason. But if they let them go just like that, there would be no point in stopping them. The squad leader reported to the team leader, and then he asked: “May we inspect your cargo?”

“Ah... ah... well, about that...”

“Or is there something you'd rather not let us see?”

The traders looked to each other, and reluctantly pulled the canvas off the cargo bed of their wagon.

There was a veritable mountain of furniture, supplies and other valuables in there. It was hard to tell if they were new or second-hand. The squad leader gave the pile an once-over before saying:

“Looks like they were taken from the nearby homes.”

The large container at the base of the cargo bed piqued the squad leader’s attention. It seemed to be moving, even though nobody was touching it. He was just about to order them to “open that box up”, but before that the mustachioed man tried to splutter out some kind of protest.

“Come on, give us a break, it’s all good merchandise.”

The man sighed, long and deep.

“Well, yes, some of it is slightly used (stolen goods). But we can’t do business if everyone keeps asking about it.”

“Where were you planning to take these?”

“Anywhere. In times of war, you can sell anything anywhere.”

“By which you mean?”

“Anything? You can sell anything. Food, furniture, daily necessities, alcohol too. Slaves as well, by the way. Ah yes, female slaves. Do you want a woman? We have all sorts here. There’s sure to be one that suits your tastes in there. We can provide anything — or anybody — you want.”

The moustached man smiled lewdly as he said that.

“If you’re a local trader, you ought to have an Imperial trading permit or a pass issued by House Formal. Could I take a look at it?”

In response to the squad leader’s question, the trader replied, “Ah, yes, of course I do.” Then he opened the bag at the driver’s seat.

“Now where did it go? It’s very important, I should have put it in a safe place. Don’t tell me it vanished all of a sudden. Everyone, please be patient, if you think this is taking too long, maybe you should go do something else in the meantime...”

The squad leader said: “It’s fine. There’s no rush. Take your time.”

The moustached man seemed very nervous, and muttered, “You are most kind.” His colleagues seemed to be holding their breath as they watched

this.

“Ah, yes, I’ve got it. This is it...”

“You, the representative in front. Bring it here. I permit you to approach me.”

In accordance with the squad leader’s directions, the representative produced a piece of folded paper. The squad leader looked at it and noticed reddish-black stains on the edges.

“This has been stained by blood.”

“No, no, I cut my hand recently, and then I touched it...”

The moustached man waved his hands as he said this.

“Gregor Benton, I presume?”

“Gregory Ha Bayton. That is my name.”

The moustached man had a look on his face which said “I won’t fall for that”.

“That should be it, right? It’s the real thing, right?”

Indeed, this was a genuine pass issued by House Formal. That said, the pass only recorded the name of the trader in the language of the Special Region and Japanese, as well as the goods he traded, and the names of the nobles who were sponsoring him.

What the squad leader was concerned about was the reports filed with them when a pass was issued. The people of the Special Region did not understand the meaning of the barcode at the base of the document.

“This document is genuine.”

With that, the members of 1st Team visibly relaxed. This was because it meant that the chances of them being enemies had gone down, while the probability of them being safe had gone up.

After the squad leader verified the pass’ date of issue, he pointed the device he was holding at the barcode at the base of the document. A picture of Gregory Ha Bayton appeared on the device’s LCD screen.

“...Hm~”

The man beside the squad leader glanced at the image, and then told him in Japanese: “These people are fakes.” The picture displayed was of an old man that looked completely unlike the moustached man before him.

“What’s wrong?”

The moustached man seemed to have sensed the change in the air, and began asking if the documentation was incomplete or if it was because there was blood on it. However, the people behind him could no longer take the tension in the air. As one, they drew their concealed weapons and prepared to engage the JSDF servicemen in a life or death melee.

However, they had anticipated this development. The team members had already backed off, and they had no difficulty dealing with this situation.

They shot the armed men in the gut. Said men bent double like they had been folded in half. Others simply keeled over, and the moustached man was arrested at gunpoint before he could draw his sword.

“They must be the ones who attacked the village!” one of the team members shouted at the dead men while pointing at the weapons they carried.

The swords they held were still stained with blood; blood which probably belonged to the villagers. The hilt of the sword bore the crest of the Imperial Army.

“Oi! Hold on, you lot! What are you doing? Massacring civilians!?”

Komurasaki and his cameraman had just rushed over.

“No. These are Imperial guerillas.”

“Really now? Are you trying to keep us from uncovering the truth about how you were murdering civilians in cold blood?”

Komurasaki called out to the cameraman, who was filming the deceased.

“Oi, I want you to get a good shot of the corpses. Make sure you get the faces. And make sure you don’t put the JSDF insignia or whatever into it!”

In accordance with Komurasaki's directions, the cameraman began recording the Imperial soldiers masquerading as traders.

The squad leader sensed that this might end up making the nightly news, so he explained the meaning of the bloodstained sword and the crest of the Imperial Army, and then ordered the captive moustached man to open the containers and luggage on the wagon.

They opened all the boxes and found bottles of all kinds. After that, the team members steadily discovered articles of what looked like camouflage uniform — speckled green and dark green — among the stolen property.

“Cheh... these Imperial soldiers did their plundering in these clothes, huh.”

The team members insisted that Komurasaki record that as well.

It did not look like JSDF camouflage battle dress at all, but these things would be enough for their victims to spread fearful rumors about “the Men in Green”.

Even Komurasaki could not refute that ironclad evidence.

“You’ve got proof, good for you, then!” Komurasaki said resentfully as he turned to the cameraman, saying:

“It would seem soldiers of the Imperial Army have disguised themselves and attacked the village. But was there a need to kill them? The servicemen of the JSDF did not concern themselves at all with capturing them to be dealt with by due process, and so I must question their actions,” and so on.

“We’re not cops,” the members of the squad grumbled. Everyone in the group seemed to share that opinion.

The squad leader ordered the moustached man to open the box which had gotten his attention in the first place.

There was a girl in there, curled up and covered in mud and blood. She trembled in fear. She seemed to be of a feline species, with a pair of cat eyes and pointy ears. Her fur was brown and her hands and feet were

tipped in sharp claws, while she had a bamboo flute on her neck.

The squad leader patted her head to comfort her, and asked:

“What’s your name?”

“...Kucy.”

The squad leader turned back to the moustached man, whose arms were raised high, and loudly demanded:

“Well then, where’s your hideout? Where’s your area of operation? Your main force? Don’t worry, we’ll make sure you spit it all out for us!”

It should be emphasised that people who used civilians as cover while they bombed, shot, and stabbed others had and deserved no rights. However, the bleeding hearts would probably insist that even people like these had to be treated like proper prisoners of war.

They would hand the moustached man to House Formal, per their agreement.

That said, outsiders would not know if being interrogated by them was a good thing or a bad thing.

The frightened, twitching expression of the moustached man was dutifully captured on film.

“What? Say again? ...You’ve spotted a pack of Black Dogs near the village?”

The soldiers went tense as they heard the squad leader’s words.

“Burack Dawgs?”

(TL Note: The JP is 黒妖犬, which Komurasaki pronounces as こくようけん to show that he has no idea what it means)

Tomita — who was escorting Komurasaki and the cameraman from behind — explained for him.

“They are Special Region Type B Dangerous Beasts, also known as “Black Dogs”. They look like dogs, but they’re the size of a tiger. They hunt in packs and they’re coming for us. Recently, Zorzal’s troops have been using

creatures like that as weapons.”

(TL Note: Black Dogs probably refers to [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_dog_\(ghost\)\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_dog_(ghost)))

Tomita and Kuribayashi formed up on both sides on Komurasaki and watched their surroundings. Under Nishina’s orders, Tozu and Azuma formed up to protect the cameraman and the sound technician with his enormous boom mike.

“This area is very dangerous, let’s go. I’m calling the Chinook to get us.”

“Don’t be foolish! If there’s such a dangerous creature around, what would we be if we didn’t film it?”

Komurasaki said that and pointed to the soldiers, who were facing the west. “Aren’t you all coming with us? We’ll be safe for sure, right?”

However, that was not the case. The commander of the 403rd Squadron had decided to defeat the monsters that showed themselves.

The Dangerous Beasts of the Special Region were a threat, but they were not creatures which could be controlled from a distance. Thus, if they were nearby, it implied that forces of the enemy must be present as well. Granted, it was very risky, but one had to reach into the fire to take the chestnuts cooking within. Defeating these creatures would allow them to exterminate Zorzal’s guerillas.

The leader of 1st Team bundled up the girl and turned her and the prisoner over to Kuribayashi, saying “Look after them for me” before rushing off to the west.

“Oi, what do you want me to do with them?”

“Give her milk, duh. Judging by your size, you’ve got a lot in there, right?”

“Are you kidding me? I can’t produce milk if I haven’t had a baby!”

Kuribayashi was left dumbfounded, embracing the girl.

On the other hand, Tomita advanced in front of Komurasaki — who was intending to move to the frontline — and spread his arms to block

him.

“Wait, please wait! I told you, we can’t do this!”

Komurasaki jabbed his finger into Tomita’s chest and yelled at him for getting in the way.

“Your duty as servicemen is to provide the maximum cooperation with members of the press!”

However, Komurasaki’s shout was drowned out by a thunderous roar that ripped through the air. A series of explosions went off from the west side of the village.

The fire support had begun

The Cobra attack helicopters were ripple-firing their rockets, while the infantry on the ground opened fire as well. Explosions went off everywhere, and Tomita and Komurasaki reflexively shrank against them.

The crawling beasts were torn apart and their blood spurted through the air. However, the four-legged beasts did not know how to retreat, and they continued their foolhardy charge by sheer weight of numbers.

“You can still shoot a powerful scene from the air!”

“You can’t compare filming on the ground to filming safely in the air! Our enemies are just a few dogs; what’s there to be afraid of?”

“There’s a lot to be afraid of! They’re fast, they move low to the ground and they’re very dangerous. And they hunt in packs!”

As a combat specialist, Tomita swiftly narrated the fearsome nature of military dogs, which he had picked up in his daily life. He went on to inform Komurasaki of exactly how much more dangerous these Black Dogs were.

A moment’s carelessness might cost them their lives. The enemy was going to come at them from all sides. There was no safe zone like the “rear echelon” for them, so finding a place where they would not be attacked was very difficult.

“And how about that girl? We have to follow you because we’re your escorts, but if this keeps up, you’ll involve that girl in the fighting too!”

As Tomita asked Komurasaki what they should do about the girl called Kucy, hesitation crossed Komurasaki’s face for the first time.

The intense downwash churned up the soil.

The Chinook Tomita had called touched down. The rear door opened, as though welcoming Tomita.

“This is bad! They’re coming, I can see them!” the cameraman shouted as he studied his viewfinder.

He had been surveying the world through his high definition camera, and so he swiftly learned of the enemy's status.

"Oh, they're Giant Ogres, and there's what look like Mammoths among them. There's a Special Region monster gallery out there and they're coming right for us!"

The forms of heavily-armored Giant Ogres loomed among the bodies of the countless Black Dogs.

They held clubs that were the size of telephone poles. Anyone foolish enough to close in with them would be crushed by their tremendous might.

Lined up into a solid wall, they advanced through the storm of bullets and shells like heavy infantry. Their presence seemed more oppressive than that of a tank.

Since they did not have a solid defensive line, the JSDF commander decided not to take them head on. Instead, he elected to flank the enemy from both sides and crush them. The soldiers went into action upon receiving their orders.

"Hurry! Hurry! We need to be airborne before the next bombardment starts!"

The airman waved his gun and gestured for them to get on after taking the captives aboard.

"Just hand the girl to the helicopter. We'll continue filming on the ground."

As he heard Komurasaki's words, the cameraman looked uneasily at him. Could he keep up through the repetitious fighting and moving while carrying his heavy camera? The doubts boiled up in his heart.

"Komurasaki-san, this isn't good. It's very dangerous," the cameraman ventured, hoping to change the man's mind.

"You stupid bastard! You'll never amount to anything because you half-ass everything!"

Komurasaki cursed and grabbed the cameraman by the collar and dragged him out in front. They started out toward the frontline, where the men of the JSDF were engaging the enemy.

Tomita looked back to Kuribayashi and had her board the Chinook with the girl.

“What are you going to do?”

“We’ll bring these people back. Please have the helicopter hold station and support us, if possible!”

“Can’t we just leave these imbeciles behind?” Kuribayashi bellowed.

“Of course we can’t. Lieutenant Itami said so, didn’t he? We’re the JSDF, loved by the people.”

Tomita smiled and winked, then caressed the head of the girl clinging to Kuribayashi.

As the large helicopter with Kuribayashi on it lifted off, Tomita smiled comfortingly as he watched them leave.

“Ahhh, this is bad. I think I felt something,” Kuribayashi muttered.

She blushed as she watched Tomita hurry toward the frontlines.

“This is a good place. There’re gaps all over the wall, just what we need. We’ll be able to see what’s outside even if we close the door.”

Komurasaki opened the door of the little cottage at the village’s edge and peered around the inside.

This dwelling place looked crude, as though construction had been rushed, but it was built to last, and so there were many pillars within.

A winged female lay on the ground where she had been raped. She appeared to be a resident here. The fact that such a beautiful woman lived out in the boondocks was quite surprising, but then again, that might have been what inflamed her attackers’ bestial lusts.

Beside her was the body of a young man, a sword protruding from his

belly. He appeared to have been trying to protect her.

However, Komurasaki paid the life and origins of these people no heed. He turned to the cameraman and said:

“Here, Fukushima. Start from here!”

“Ah, we can’t. It’s too dangerous here, Komurasaki-san. Wild beasts are sensitive to the scent of corpses and they’ll find us.”

“It’ll be fine. There’re corpses everywhere. Once we blend in with the stink, they won’t find us!”

Komurasaki seemed abnormally excited. As they saw the brilliance of madness in his eyes, the cameraman and the sound technician could not help but back away from him. However, they could not flee now, not even if they wanted. As though to tell them that their time was up, the Chinook flew over their heads.

In addition, the legion of monsters — composed largely of Black Dogs — was closing in. Like Komurasaki said, all they could do was hide in this little hovel and pray the enemies passed them over.

The cameraman and the others — including Nishina and the other JSDF servicemen — rushed into the house and closed the door behind them.

Shortly after that, there was a tremendous crash as a gigantic canine creature crashed against the door. The savage breathing of the wild beast and the way it tore at the door filled them with terror, and they were keenly aware of the dire situation they were in.

“What are you lot doing? Go block the door up!”

They did as Komurasaki indicated and began piling obstacles on the door.

“Use the bigger pieces of furniture as barricades and put them on the bottom. Flip the bed over so there’s more surface area in contact with the ground! Use the logs as wedges to jam it in!”

“Ko-Komurasaki-san, you sound pretty experienced with this sort of thing,” Matsuzaki of the press team said as he put his mike aside and

piled the obstacles on.

“Don’t look down on us; we were veterans of the anti-war protests... I’ve got live combat experience of climbing over chain link fences and fighting with metal pipes! Bring that wood over and shove it in there!”

(TL Note: This part probably refers to the anti-Vietnam War protests in Japan which sparked a lot of student violence in universities. The JP uses the word 全共闘内ゲバ世代)

Everyone piled the furniture up, blocking up the doorway and obstructing it.

The Chinook hovering overhead launched a fierce attack. Even if it only made a small difference, Kuribayashi was doing her best to wipe the monsters out.

However, it was not effective against the heavily armored Giant Ogres. The bullets simply bounced off them, and their wildly-flailing clubs smashed through the unoccupied houses nearby and demolished them.

Some of the Ogres even tried throwing their clubs, in the hope of bringing down the Chinook.

They missed, but there was a feeling that if they connected, they could cut the helicopter out of the sky in a single hit. Just watching the scene made the onlookers break out in a cold sweat.

Komurasaki and the cameraman Fukushima were beside themselves in ecstasy as they filmed the scene.

“Wonderful, wonderful! How moving! How powerful! We’ve got the Pulitzer Prize in the bag now!”

“These, these guys are weirdos,” Tomita muttered as he sat down and watched Komurasaki.

Granted, he had run into the battlefield of his own accord, so he was hardly normal himself. However, Tomita had discovered that the creatures called newsmen took that to the next level. They could have taken a helicopter and gone as they pleased, but instead they recorded scenes of

people about to be killed or swallowed up by disaster. They did not warn them or aid them, but instead calmly watched from the side, preserving it for posterity. One could not make a living this way without being exceptionally cold-hearted.

Newsmen were the people who ordered their pilots to lower altitude so they could film trucks and the like being devoured by natural disasters, but they would never do anything like warn the truck that it was speeding into danger.

Suddenly, Nishina and the others poked his shoulder with a “Oi, oi, Tomita.”

What was the matter? Tomita turned, and Master Sergeant Nishina pointed to the Winged Woman on the ground.

“Look at her.”

“This... this... isn’t this Tuwal-san?”

The name from Leading Private Azuma’s lips sounded familiar.

“Eh?” Tomita went as he got closer and looked at the woman’s face.

She was Tuwal, the Harpy from Akusho who had foretold the earthquake. She had left the Imperial Capital with her lover to live her life correctly in a frontier village.

Tomita gently prodded her still-warm cheek.

Was she alive, or was she dead?

Cough.

Though it was weak, there was a reaction from Tuwal.

“She, she’s still alive!”

“Ohh, she’s still alive?!”

Nishina and the others cheered up immediately, now that they knew that she could be saved. However, the weak flame of her life was on the verge of guttering out. They had to get her to medical treatment as soon as possible.

“If this keeps up, she’ll die!”

“Nishina-san, there’s no time.”

Nishina nodded in response to Tozu and Azuma’s words.

“All right! Tomita, get the Chinook. We’re getting out of here!”

However, Komurasaki protested Master Sergeant Nishina’s decision.

“Are you retarded? You’re telling me we’re going out now?”

There was no doubt that the monsters roaming outside would spot them if they left.

Even an amateur like him knew that the four JSDF servicemen here could not stand against that alarming horde outside.

“So you want us to abandon this girl?! You lot go on and on about how we take life and death into our own hands, but aren’t you just as ruthless yourselves?”

However, Komurasaki tried to deflect the matter away from himself.

“Why don’t you consider your priorities? Saving a dying girl of the Special Region is very important, but are you telling me that you want to endanger Japanese citizens like ourselves to save her? Really, you lot care more about them than your own people.”

Nishina and Komurasaki glared at each other.

However, Tomita separated the two of them.

“It’s fine. We can get her to the chopper without going outside.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“We punch a hole in the ceiling. Then we put her on a rope.”

Tomita pointed to the ceiling, and then turned a disdainful eye to Komurasaki.

“We’re not the IJA of the past. I will show you what it means to be a modern man of the JGSDF.”

Putting a hole in the half-wrecked ceiling was not very difficult. First, they opened fire on the ceiling struts to cut them, then climbed up the pillars to prise open the roof timbers.

However, as they hacked away at the support frame of the crudely-built cottage, the walls that had felt sturdy until just now began to waver. It would seem this house was supported by that frame. Without it, the hovel began to shake like a two-bit stage prop.

In addition, the Chinook conducting the helicopter casualty evacuation seemed to have gotten the monsters' attention. Monsters flooded toward the house from all sides, and a rain of 120mm mortars pelted down on their heads.

Dust flew everywhere, and these fiends of the Special Region were blown to smithereens and buried under the dirt.

The airborne Cobras fired their rockets, raking them over the armored Ogres.

In the face of the spine-chilling explosions and the no-longer reliable wall, Komurasaki covered his ears and shouted, "Son of a bitch, it won't hold!"

The snouts of the Black Dogs began poking in through the gaps in the walls. The startled cameraman scrambled back in fear and fell flat on his butt.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Tomita raised his rifle — with bayonet affixed — and fired it as soon as the blade bit into the beast's flesh. The recoil helped him wrench his bayonet loose, and it had certainly dealt his foe a wound.

Tomita and the others opened fire through the walls — at the beasts poking their noses through it — to keep them away.

"You're up next."

Komurasaki raised his head as he heard Nishina's voice. He saw Tozu, carrying Tuwal from behind, being winched into the Chinook.

“You, go!”

Komurasaki pointed out Matsuzaki the sound technician as the next evacuee. Nishina passed the rope under Matsuzaki’s armpits and secured it.

“Fukushima, your turn.”

“Ko-Komurasaki-san, what about you?”

“I’ll be the last of the civilians to go. Say what you will, I’m one of the people in charge here. Make sure you get a good shot of me coming up.”

Before he finished, there was a sound like a dump truck smashing into the shaking house.

Dust and wood chips rained down from above. The walls creaked and split, and a gigantic monster which looked like a rhino was visible through the gaps in the wall. It was trying to break through the walls with its thick and sharp horn.

Tomita deftly changed out his magazine and fired on it.

The rhino-like monster was riddled with bullets and fell back as a corpse. However, the hole in the wall it had made became an entry point, and the monsters swarmed in. Among them were the forms of the rare Trolls and Kobolds.

Private Azuma pulled his trigger and ran dry of rounds in no time.

Panicked, he worked to change his empty magazine, but as he did, an axe-wielding Goblin closed in on him.

Tomita drew his sidearm and fired at the Goblin’s belly over Azuma’s shoulder. Once it was on the ground, he kicked and kicked at it, then raised his pistol at the Troll crawling over the corpse into the breach.

Azuma had finished reloading in this time, and renewed his shooting. He and Tomita covered each other while they were reloading, in a spectacular display of effective support fire.

Fortunately, their enemies were not that smart.

Now that there was a gap, they single-mindedly tried to break through it. Thus, all they had to do was hold the line there and they could keep them at bay.

“All right, we’re next.”

He glanced behind him, seeing Komurasaki’s legs vanish through the hole in the ceiling.

“Rope extraction! The two of you are going up together!”

With that, Nishina tied the ropes to Azuma and Tomita, who were too busy shooting to do it themselves.

“All right! Do it!”

In response to Nishina’s roar over the radio, the Chinook suddenly ascended at a speed of 600 meters per minute.

The three of them soared into the air above the little house at an alarming rate.

They pointed their muzzles down, expending all their remaining ammunition in their former perimeter. Then, as a farewell gift, they dropped all their grenades below them.

Below their eyes, the little cottage collapsed under the explosions, burying many monsters underneath.

An F-4 Phantom passed Tomita and the others as they rose. It dropped napalm bombs, instantly turning the battlefield into an inferno.

The stench of monsters burning and their cries of pain echoed through the land.

If one looked into the distance, one could see 403rd Squadron heading toward the place where the monsters had come from. From the air, there was a formation of Imperial troops with their banners waving.

The Imperial troops knew that the operation was a failure, and decided to flee.

Their plan was to attack the frontier village, then attack the Japanese troops that showed up while posing as traders and villagers, and then bring in their monster army during the confusion.

However, the technique had only worked the first few times they tried it. The enemy had instantly improved their response rate, and even their main force had been discovered. Now, they were the ones being hounded instead.

Helm, the guerilla leader, had no choice but to find another way. He spurred his horse on as he agonized over the problem.

“Flee into the forest! You’ll be found more easily if you scatter!”

That said, the soldiers naturally wanted to run in all directions. They felt that since the enemy was hunting down their formation, then leaving the group might give them a better chance of survival. However, once they dispersed, they would not be able to participate in future battles.

He felt that the monsters running beside his horse were an eyesore, but at the moment they were necessary for Zorzal’s forces.

“Eh, it can’t be helped.”

Helm stopped his horse and produced a flute from an inner pocket.

“General, do you plan to use the trump card you have in store?”

One of his adjutants asked him that as he bellowed at his men not to scatter.

As Helm played an inaudible note, he paused briefly to respond, “This is to save our lives too. It might not do much, but I want to give the enemy some trouble.”

After saying that, Helm continued playing the silent flute.

After being taken into the Chinook, Tomita was so tired that he was laid out and panting on the floor of the cabin, but he managed to proudly ask Komurasaki: “Heh... how about that? ...Did you see that!?”

A visibly displeased Komurasaki replied, “Aye, I did. I saw it all. The soldiers don’t protect the people. That’s what I believe, and I won’t back down on it. But you guys aren’t regular soldiers. To be precise, you’re men of the JSDF... oi, what are you filming? Don’t film me!”

Komurasaki glared at Fukushima the cameraman, who was grinning while training the lens on him.

He was probably upset by someone recording himself agreeing with Tomita, and gently pushed the camera away.

However, the cameraman instead continued filming the floor of the Chinook.

“Oi! What’s going on?!”

Fukushima stared at his camera. His entire body was stiff, fresh blood leaked from his mouth, and he collapsed onto the ground.

As Komurasaki looked at the spreading patch of reddish black, he screamed,

“What the hell is going on?!”

At some point, a large monster had appeared behind Fukushima the cameraman.

The monster had plunged its thick claws into Fukushima’s back. It was croaking and screeching even as it grew larger.

Its limbs were sheathed in rippling muscle, and its claws were growing ever longer and sharper. It was clearly bad news.

Its fur was brown and tan. Its face was savage, a carnivore that was neither feline nor canine. However, its chest was a clear sign that it was female. That strangely human-like feature made them think it might have human blood in its veins.

Kucy had been a little girl until recently, but her head now touched the ceiling of the Chinook, forcing it to hunch over as it grew to a great size.

The Chinook’s ceiling had never been high to begin with, and this forced the large monster to curl up into a ball. There was no trace of reason in its

eyes, only base savagery.

Nishina and the other servicemen could only stare dumbfoundedly, unable to move as the girl turned into a monstrous beast.

They could not open fire from this position.

The creature was coming from the front of the aircraft, where the cockpit was. If they missed, they might end up shooting into the cockpit, where they would most likely hit the pilot or an important flight system.

The monstrous Kucy swiped with her powerful limbs at anything she saw.

Matsuzaki was still cradling his boom mike when he was knocked back by the fearsome power of that hand, and he flew out the rear door of the cabin, which had not yet been fully closed.

“Ah, aieeeee!!!!!!”

Scared senseless by this scene, Komurasaki collapsed just as he was about to rise.

Fortunately for him, it meant that the monster’s arm swiped a head’s distance above him. It would seem the creature prioritized nearby targets over distant ones, and Komurasaki was next.

The monster raised an arm, and it whistled through the air to carve a chunk out of Komurasaki’s flesh...

Just as that was about to happen, the sound of a heavy metallic impact rang out, and Komurasaki’s body slid toward the back of the cabin.

Kuribayashi warded off the monster’s claw with a reverse-gripped knife.

“Ku-Kuribayashi!” Tomita shouted.

“Protect Tuwal and Komurasaki-san!” she shouted back.

Tomita picked up his rifle and grabbed Tuwal, while Nishina dragged Komurasaki by the lapels toward the rear of the craft. Still, they could only bring them to the rear hatch; any further and they would be outside, which meant an assuredly fatal fall.

Kuribayashi cast aside her gouged helmet and faced the beast head on. The helmet could not stop the creature's claws, and blood dripped from her forehead, down her cheek, and stained the tip of her combat boots.

Kuribayashi wiped the blood from her forehead with her sleeve, standing with her knife ready as she carefully studied Kucy for weaknesses.

"You looked like such a cute kid... to think your true form was a monster like this. You really pulled a fast one on us, huh?"

Confused, the monster looked at the tiny female human fighting back against it.

The difference between their physical statures was readily apparent. The conclusion was clear to all, even if they did not fight. Still, that little body did not flee, but strode forward in challenge. The creature could not understand that.

"Haaaaaaaaah!"

With a great cry, Kuribayashi brandished her knife and lunged in for an attack.

A high-pitched sound rang out as the knife hit the beast's claw.

Kuribayashi worked her knife again. That shrill sound echoed through the cabin once more, and sparks flew as steel met claw.

The monster bared its fangs to frighten its foe, swinging its arms with brute force.

Kuribayashi dropped to the ground, rolling to avoid the steadily advancing swipes of its claws. She slipped past the thrust of the attack and worked her way into her opponent's reach before initiating melee combat, slashing and stabbing at her foe with her knife.

Every time they clashed, new wounds appeared on both sides, and their blood flowed freely.

Kuribayashi's arms and legs were covered in injuries.

Similarly, the monster's hide sprouted cuts and stabs, its purplish-black blood staining its fur.

Kuribayashi stripped off her heavy body armor, as though finding it bothersome. She toyed with the beast with nimble movements, feinting several times and taking advantage of her foe's momentary openings to close the distance and go for the kill.

However, the monster swung its mighty arm, and tossed Kuribayashi into the wall of the cabin like it was brushing the dust away.

“Kuh!”

Unable to defend herself, Kuribayashi slowly slumped to the ground after hitting the wall.

The monster's left armpit seemed to have been cut up, and unable to bear the pain, it went to one knee while moaning.

Then, it pounced on Kuribayashi, as though saying, “You put up one hell of a fight!”

However, Azuma, Tozu, Tomita and the others raised their bayonets and counter-charged it.

Their lunge did not harm the monster, but it protected Kuribayashi.

Angered by the interference of the three males, Kucy released a deafening ululation, flailing its arms wildly. Those sharp claws broke the Chinook's windows and slashed through the interior of the cabin.

After shaking her head dizzily, Kuribayashi swiftly inverted her hands like a gymnast performing her floor exercises and shoved up from under the monster's jaw. The beast's head collided with the low ceiling, while its chin was wounded from being attacked from below.

Kuribayashi then continued her combination attack. Unable to bear it, the creature drew its arms back to defend itself. It was then that Kuribayashi drove her knife's blade into the tip of its elbow.

“The ulnar nerve, or the funny bone... Well, if you cut that on a human, their arm becomes useless. What about a monster like you?”

Even when a person fully relaxed their arm, there was still a bit of tension in their muscles. This was called muscle tone.

An arm could move freely because of the balance between contracting and relaxing muscles. If one severed the relaxing muscle fibers, then all the contractile muscle could do was kink up, unable to perform any movements. The reason why people with neuromuscular paralysis had their strange, hook-handed posture was because of this reason.

The monster, whose arm was curled up into what looked like an eagle's claw, swung at Kuribayashi with its left arm. However, with only one usable arm, more openings appeared in its stance.

Kuribayashi leapt back to avoid the beast's claw, and then shouted: "Pilot-san! When I give the signal, reverse the chopper!"

"...What do you plan to do?!"

"Shut up! Just back it up! I'm going to toss this bastard out!"

As Nishina heard this, he clutched Tuwal tightly, and indicated that Tomita, Komurasaki and the others should hold on tight so as not to be thrown out.

Kuribayashi stood on her palms like a gymnast, and her swinging legs swept at Kucy's left arm, which was braced against the ground.

With all her weight on that arm, Kucy found itself striking the ground. It hurt so much that it grit its teeth in pain. However, it immediately rose to its feet while extending that arm; it planned to seize Kuribayashi with that arm.

That was the moment Kuribayashi was aiming for. She charged into the creature's unprotected bosom.

"Now!"

With that, she executed a shoulder throw toward the rear of the Chinook.

However, Kucy pressed her weight on Kuribayashi's body, squashing her from above.

Kuribayashi could not finish the throw, and ended up being pressed from above by the monster's massive body.

As the ground suddenly pitched under its feet, Kucy scrambled at the craft's interior to avoid being tossed out. Then, it bared its fangs at Kuribayashi and drew close, intending to chew on her head.

"However strong you are, I'm still not lez!"

Kuribayashi desperately pushed Kucy's face away.

"Gaaahhhh, if you want a kiss so bad, go find a man to give you one!"

However, Kuribayashi could not defeat that preternatural strength. She twisted her head aside to avoid that drooling tongue and that lower jaw covered in sharp teeth, screaming "Nooooo!"

"Kuribayashi!"

Now that the helicopter was canted back at an angle, it was all Tomita and the others could do to keep Komurasaki and Tuwal from falling. They could only watch all of this impotently.

Just as those teeth were about to touch Kuribayashi's face, she delivered a mighty head butt to the universal weakness of all monsters — their snouts.

"Ahhhhh, what a pain!"

Agony coursed through Kucy's nose, and it could not help but twist its head aside. In the moment that it jerked its body away, Kuribayashi scrambled free of its vast body, then twined her legs around its neck and executed a choke from behind its back.



“Fall, damn you!”

In the face of this sudden reversal, Kucy tried to shake Kuribayashi off. It suddenly rose up and bashed its head against the ceiling.

Kucy’s head and Kuribayashi’s body collided with the ceiling. As that frightening sound rang through the cabin, Kucy’s massive body slid

toward the open rear hatch.

The unconscious Kuribayashi fell toward the outside as well.

Tomita desperately lunged at Kuribayashi. Azuma and Tozu reached out to grab Tomita's legs. By the narrowest of scrapes, Tomita's fingertips touched Kuribayashi's bandolier and tightened around it.

Perhaps it was because of the shock of the impact, but the pilot quickly levelled out the Chinook.

The monster was still gripping at the cabin, hanging from the edge of the hatch. It looked like it was trying to climb aboard with just its left arm.

Tozu and the others saw this and tried to kick it off, lashing out repeatedly with their combat boots. The monster struggled desperately to resist in its desire to not be thrown off, but then Tomita aimed his 9mm pistol at it.

"So long!"

The series of bullets turned Kucy's face into a pomegranate. Even so, it emitted a mighty bestial howl, its limbs flailing as it fell.

As Kuribayashi came to, she was congratulated by everyone in awestruck tones: "You really are one hell of a woman."

"Where is this?"

It would seem she had bumped her head, so her memories were unclear. Her vision was blurred and her head was spinning.

"Are you all right? Do you remember us? Who am I? Don't be like that!"

Tomita and the others showered Kuribayashi with thumps on the shoulder, until she winced in pain. However, that brought her memories back to her in short order, and she remembered where she was.

"Ouch! I hurt everywhere, don't be so rough with me!"

"Sorry, sorry. But really, you were amazing out there."

Kuribayashi smiled as she heard Tomita's words.

"So you've fallen for me? Why don't we go out?"

Kuribayashi said this in a joking tone, because she knew Tomita was already attached. This was not just because it was alright to be rejected, but because she wanted to gamble on a million to one chance that he would be up for it. However, the answer was evident enough; yet Tomita responded in a way which Kuribayashi had not expected at all.

“Ah, I can’t. You see, I’m going to get married after this war is over.”

The cabin fell into silence.

“Eh...”

Nishina and the others went pale. Kuribayashi shivered as she realised the dire situation her careless words had wrought.

“You... you!”

“That... that’s a...”

“Death flag!”

Indeed. It was an ironclad rule that anyone who said “I’m getting married after this war is over”, “We’re having kids after this” and the like would undoubtedly meet a tragic fate. Then there were things like, “I’ll hold them off, you guys go ahead first”, a line which was widely known to spell certain doom for the speaker.

Itami had forbidden these words; he had banned them with all the censor-happy fervor of the People’s Republic of China. It was on the level of receiving a “this search result has been removed due to relevant legislation” when Googling it. Yet, Tomita had uttered that line in the end.

Kuribayashi realised that she was responsible for that, and naturally, she cowered in fear.

“What, what should we do?!”

She was more panicked than she had been while fighting the monster. As he saw her like that, Tomita replied:

“Ah, don’t worry about it. We’ll be fine. It’s just a superstition, nothing more.”

“That’s no good. We have to get back to the el-tee.”

“Him? You mean Itami? Wha? Why?”

“Itami will surely know a way around this!” Kuribayashi declared. A man who lived a hacked life like his would surely be able to snap a death flag like that in half while chuckling.

The more she thought about that, the more Kuribayashi obsessed about the death flag she had raised with Tomita.

Chateau Formal had never been this busy before.

“Zorzal imprisoned the Emperor and Princess. They were rescued with the aid of the JSDF, and now Italica is officially the new Imperial Capital.” Because of that pronouncement, the chateau was now a temporary royal palace, which meant that the senators and their families flocked to the new capital in great numbers.

The first thing that the legitimate government of the Empire would do was build an army to retake the Imperial Capital.

However, the pro-peace faction and all their banner lords could not scrape up enough troops to resist Zorzal. Thus, they had sent envoys to all manner of nations and former vassals, and even to the demihumans that they had formerly scorned. The government promised to elevate their status in exchange for military aid.

Now that Italica was a temporary royal palace and also a military headquarters, a massive tent garrison had sprung up outside the city. The canteens and taverns lining the streets were filled with soldiers of every race and species. While they could be more relaxed with the enlisted ranks, commanders and other high-ranking senior officers had to be treated politely, so the maids of House Formal were kept busy round the clock, with hardly any time to catch their breath.

The few human maids of House Formal were hard-pressed to handle the tasks of proper service by themselves. So the demihuman maids — not very presentable in Imperial high society — were mobilized to help them.

The cat-eyed and bespectacled Persia, the Warrior Bunny Mamina, Aurea the Medusa and so on had to receive guests of all sorts and complete various tasks.

Aurea the Medusa's crimson hair snakes twisted back and forth like tentacles as she rushed into the kitchen and shouted, "Head maid, it's terrible! It's horrible!"

The head maid was commanding from the kitchen, alternating between castigating the chefs for insufficient skill and scolding the maids receiving guests for being improperly dressed.

"Head Maid, His Majesty is looking for you!"

It would seem the "terrible" thing had nothing to do with the withered man enfolded by those crimson hair snakes.

Was he young, or was he old? He was mummified now, so that could not be seen. However, his sex could at least be told from his clothing. A careful look at his face would tell that there was no misery or fear on his face; he had gone to the gods with a look of supreme bliss on his face.

The Head Maid wrinkled her brows.

"Aurea, have the mice been getting in again?"

Catching the mice was all well and good, but that meant the kitchen would get dirty. How could she bring a corpse here? The Head Maid delivered all this and more in a quiet voice.

However, Aurea did not seem to mind and delightedly replied:

"I found a mouse and caught him and drained him dry. I'm so happy I got to eat my fill!"

How much life-force had she absorbed? Aurea's skin was shiny and radiant. Her crimson pupils were narrowed and she was all smiles.

"Please do so in moderation. Once you're used to gourmet meals, it will be hard to bear when you can no longer indulge yourself."

"I understand. I'll try to hold myself back."

Aurea's hair drooped, as though displaying her depressed mood. She dumped the mummified man to the ground, where the maids would dispose of it as a piece of litter.

"Then, who sent this one?"

Aurea looked like she could not harm a fly, but in truth, she was a vampire — or rather, she was a thief of "essence".

She did not feed using brute force and sharp teeth to tear her prey to shreds. Instead, she used her doll-like beauty and cuteness to lure her prey, before binding them with her serpentine hair tentacles and sucking them dry, much like an insectivorous plant.

Without sharp claws or fangs, she instead used pleasure to keep her prey from fleeing.

Once those tentacles touched her victims, they would drown in that hellish pleasure and lose the ability to fight back. By the time they realised the fact, their souls would have been squeezed dry and they would shortly become residents of the netherworld. In addition, Aurea could look through the memories of her victims. There was no way to hide anything contained within the mind from her. That said, Aurea could not memorize every single detail, so she only remembered the information she was concerned about.

"This man was the minion of someone called Bouro. He was planning to poison the food."

The Head Maid sighed as she heard Aurea's report. "As I thought..."

"It seems we can't do anything before catching this Bouro person."

Aurea nodded in agreement.

The Head Maid sighed again, and then she pulled herself together.

"Anyway, you came here because His Majesty was looking for me. I shall go at once. Mome, Aurea, you two will follow me as well. Hurry!"

As the aged Head Maid said that, she forcefully gathered up her skirts.

Then, she sprinted through the hallways with a vigor that did not match

her age, as though something terrible had happened. She was trailed by her trusted Mome and Aurea.

Mamina the Warrior Bunny hurriedly ducked out of her way along the corridor.

Persia the bespectacled Catgirl maid was sending dirty dishes back to the kitchen. She swiftly stepped around them with a spectacular pivoting turn, maintaining her balance on the stacked dishes as her skirts fluttered up around her. Her comrades applauded this feat, which would not have been out of place in a talent show or a circus act.

Like a rising tide, the Head Maid ran to the door of the suite on the top floor, and then took deep breaths to calm her panting. She swiftly wiped her sweat and inspected her bearing to ensure she was presentable.

Mome and Aurea also helped adjust each other's clothing.

Pina's female knights stood guard on either side of the door, without moving a single muscle.

Though they looked at her with sympathy, the Head Maid swiftly regained her serious demeanour. Perhaps it was a natural born ability or some sort of special skill, but her sweat immediately stopped flowing, as though a tap had been turned off.

She opened the door, first announcing, "Your servant presents herself in response to Your Majesty's summons" before entering.

Emperor Molt lay on the large bed. Count Marx, his regent and the Japanese ambassador Sugawara stood by his side.

"Your servant presents herself in response to Your Majesty's summons."

The Emperor looked to the Head Maid who served him, and then introduced Sugawara to her.

"This is Sugawara-dono, the ambassador from Japan. He will be staying here for some time, so I hope you will arrange quarters for him. I understand that this is an imposition, but I hope you will find a way to accommodate him."

Those were the Emperor's words, but still, the Head Maid's expression quivered.

Chateau Formal was already home to far more guests than it had been designed for. They had run out of space to accommodate the Imperial senators and various nobles, so the government had begun requisitioning the homes of wealthy farmers and nobles in the city, as well as those civilian homes which looked presentable.

Even the tent city outside the walls of Italica was emblazoned with the banners of the various nobles in residence.

Though Sugawara was only one person, arranging a room for him under the present circumstances was still very difficult.

Therefore, when Sugawara said, "There is no need to worry, Your Majesty. I have already found a room of my own in the city", even the Head Maid sighed audibly, a clear breach of etiquette.

"Oh? May I know where you are taking residence?"

Still, nobody noticed the head maid's gaffe. This was because Count Marx's question drew everyone's attention. The way he asked his question seemed to be a clear attempt to ask if an outsider like Sugawara could find a place to stay in Italica. It was highly discomforting.

"Well, we are quite hampered ourselves. If there is a large place like that around, I was wondering if you could share the details with us."

"The truth is, I reached out to a merchant I knew and borrowed the corner of a warehouse from them. Under these circumstances, being able to sleep without fear of wind or rain is the most important thing; all other considerations are secondary. Granted, it is somewhat cramped, but it is still better than my dormitory as a student.

The Emperor nodded in relief.

"Wonderful. I feared that slighting the emissary of Nihon would result in our reputation being dragged through the gutter, so I made an unreasonable request of yourself, Head Maid. Now, there is nothing to worry about, so I rescind that order of mine."

With that, the Emperor permitted the head maid to leave.

“Still, you must not act incautiously around the Nihonjin. They have secretly forged relationships with the merchants of our Empire. We must be on our guard.”

“Ah, Count Marx. That’s enough of that sort of thing.”

“But we’ve been surrounded by the pro-Nihon faction before we knew.”

“What are you saying at this point in time? Ever since we asked the Nihonjin for help in fleeing the Imperial Capital, have we not already been in their midst? Am I wrong, Head Maid?”

“Of course not, Your Majesty. That is exactly the case.”

The Head Maid turned back to confirm that just as she was about to leave the room.

“Look now, Italica is now heavily influenced by Nihon.”

The Head Maid explained herself as she saw the upset and angry look on Count Marx’s face.

“The blame for that can be laid on the ones who snuck their filthy rats into House Formal, pardon me for being blunt, in the hopes of doing ill to Your Majesty. If I may dare to say so, perhaps the good Count might do well to work with Nihon to fight against these petty villains.”

Delilah’s attempted murder of a Japanese citizen had put House Formal in a dilemma. The only way for them to clear their names was to root out the underground organization responsible, which meant working with the Japanese. As a result, the House had built a close relationship with the Japanese, to the point where they could be considered representatives of the Japanese government.

Count Marx was clearly displeased by this, but in the end, he could only say “Forget it” and show how he was swallowing that bitter pill.

The fact was that the Imperial administration had found its footing due to the cooperation of House Formal and the Japanese government.

“Then, how goes the war? Can we retake the Capital?” the Emperor

asked.

Marx reported that the loyalists were mounting an attack to retake the Imperial Capital. The 5000 prisoners of war released by the Japanese government formed the core of a semblance of an army.

However, Zorzal's troops were regulars, boasting superior fighting ability. They could not make any progress even if the path to attack the enemy was clear.

"We are reconstituting the 2nd Army. Once we can get our reinforcements to the frontlines, we should be able to bring our elites near the Capital."

The Emperor chuckled at Marx's overly optimistic statement, even though he knew that there were things that Marx could not mention.

"And what of the battle in the shadows?"

The Head Maid reported that over 50 people had tried to infiltrate the Chateau or incite an uprising in Italica ever since Emperor Molt had made his base in Italica.

"We've already discovered several rats trying to infiltrate the feast. Just now, we caught someone trying to poison the food in the stores. However, Aurea was waiting there and eliminated him."

Aurea nodded in silence. She looked like nothing more than an adorable blossom of a girl, so long as she held her peace and kept to herself. The Emperor was captivated by her charms, but his knowledge of the Venus' flytrap nature of Medusas put a complex expression on his face.

After that, he considered why the previous Lord Formal had taken this Medusa into his household. If... perhaps... yes, that must have been it. If one could arrange for her to siphon essence under the conditions of "don't kill your partner" or "don't harm them", surely one would be able to enjoy the most exquisite ecstasy. It would certainly be worth it.

The hellish pleasure of legend. It held a demonic charm; the temptation of experiencing sex which would drain one's strength dry, to the point of death.

“Aurea, is it? Could you tell me about the relationship between yourself and your previous master?”

The Emperor was unsure of how to bring the subject up.

Depending on her answer, he might consider keeping her around to serve him.

“We are currently keeping an eye on spies in the chateau. We shall exterminate them when the time is right.”

However, the Head Maid seemed to have sensed the Emperor’s intentions, and interrupted his train of thought.

If she were a human noblewoman; no, even if she were a demihuman maid, she would have sent them over to serve the Emperor in his bed if they caught his interest. However, Aurea was the only person that she could not permit to go.

“Are these people Zorzal’s men?” the Emperor murmured.

Count Marx nodded.

“They might be agents of other countries, but in all likelihood, it is as Your Majesty says.”

Italica — the temporary Imperial Capital — was the target of a clandestine campaign by Zorzal. There was an offensive underway, and the fighting was intense. Thus, Aurea was a valuable combat unit; she could not be removed from the frontline.

That said...

“Your Majesty. There were those with incurable illnesses, or wounds which would not heal, who feared death, or who were in pain... the old Master gave me the task of laying them to rest with the tenderest of mercies.”

Aurea sensed the look in the Emperor’s eyes as he looked at her.

Sadly, many people looked at her the same way. More accurately, it had been like this before she came here. This was the reason why Medusas were treated as an unclean race; why they were ostracized and disdained.

“Is that so. Sooner or later, the day will come when I will fear for my own end. When that time comes, I hope you will aid me as well.”

“I understand.”

The Emperor sighed deeply, and said, “Go then. Do battle with the enemy.”

“There’s someone who’s not on the guest list. He’s currently in the western corner of the great hall.”

The Warrior Bunny Mamina heard the voice in her earpiece, and led her subordinate battle maids to quietly encircle the rats who had snuck into the feast.

With cultured, practiced grace, Mamina shrouded the murderous intent in her heart with a tender smile. Balancing a drinking-laden tray in one hand, she approached her target and asked, “Would you care for some refreshment?”

Panic flashed momentarily across the man’s face, but Mamina’s warm smile seemed to put him at ease.

“Thank you,” he said as he helped himself to a wineglass of amber-colored liquid.

“It’s quite rare to see a Warrior Bunny as a maid.”

“About four-fifths of House Formal’s maids are demihumans. If I may be so rude, may I ask whose household you hail from?”

“I am Nikas. I am a butler of Baron Monterey.”

The man glibly answered Mamina’s question — it would seem he had prepared for this.

Baron Monterey was one of the few members of the neutral faction, but he had declared his loyalty for the Emperor. He and his personal troops had arrived at Italica recently. Since he was new here, nobody recognized him. Thus, most people would let him off after light questioning because of that.

“He’s lying. Baron Monterey has a man called Nikas on his staff, but his face is completely different from this guy.”

A man’s voice pointed out the lie through the background radio chatter.

Looking up, one could see countless cameras installed in the chateau’s ceiling, observing every corner of the building. The computer located in a different room compared the guests to their mugshots, picking out anyone suspicious.

To the enemies who did not know of such technology, Italica and Chateau Formal were nothing less than the gates of hell. Spies checked in — they did not check out.

Mamina smiled. “Nikas-sama, you’re quite a handsome fellow. Would you mind sharing a word with me in private?”

She closed the distance between the two of them, until their chests were almost touching, and whispered sweetly into his ear, as though her voice was going to melt into it.

“M-me?”

“Indeed. Do you know of a custom of the Warrior Bunnies? When we see a handsome man, we won’t let them go. What do you think of... tender love in a private corner?”

Mamina turned pleading eyes on the man, who was immobile on account of being charmed by her.

The pain in his belly told him to keep still and remain silent, and that he had better be careful even of his breathing.

The man’s eyes slowly left Mamina’s and wandered downwards.

Past those ample peaks, he finally saw the tips of a pair of daggers pressed against him.

The man was encircled from the front and rear by maids, as though he was their plaything. One might envy his position, but the truth was, he had blades resting on him from three different directions. His situation was dire indeed.

“Then, please come this way.”

“...Is, is there some kind of mistake? I’m not into this sort of play...”

“There’s no point acting dumb. I hope you’ll tell us your name and who sent you. Let me get this out of the way first; our house counts a Medusa as one of its vassals, so resistance is futile.”

And so, yet another spy was brought out of the great hall with a stiff smile on his face.

If he were a rookie spy who yielded quickly to torture, he would probably be sentenced to forced labor in the quarries or in some mine. If he was a hardened agent who refused to talk, he would be fed to Aurea, where he would be squeezed dry even as he rolled around in pleasure.

The man began trying to explain himself once they reached the empty corridor.

“Wait, wait a minute. I am a spy, but not from the Crown Prince. I’ve always wanted to pledge my loyalty to His Majesty. It’s true. I can hail the Emperor if you want, or curse Zorzal’s name for as long as you like.”

“So stop wasting time and give us your name and allegiance.”

“I can’t do that. My job is to sweep the interior for traitors. It’s true. Your sentries do good work; they found me out right away. Well done. It was a flawless display, I’d give you full marks for it.”

“Thank you for your praise. However, if you don’t tell us who you work for, we can’t trust you. Do you think we’re stupid enough to be content with that?”

“Is that so? Yes... all right, I got it, I got it. My name and allegiance, is that it?”

Mamina stopped, and waited for the man to speak.

“My name is Nora. In truth, I am one of Count Marx’s men.”

Count Marx? If that were the case, then he was an ally. But why did this man’s voice suddenly sound like a woman’s?

As they paused to think for a moment, an opening appeared.

The man took advantage of that opening and slipped the cordon of Mamina and her people. No, the man's body and clothes tore apart, and a woman emerged from within. Mamina and her fellow maids were a second late in reacting to this unexpected development.

“Ah, stop!”

Mamina and the others hurriedly gave chase.

“As if any spy would actually stop when told to!”

“A shapeshifter?!”

(TL note: the original text used シヴオージョニー and I have no idea what that means)

That woman was a demihuman.

Her bestial athletic ability allowed her to rival Mamina's feline jumping power. Everyone was cowed into submission by the frightening experience that her battle-hardened and scarred body gave off.

Mamina tossed a series of dirks at her. Many of them were deflected with the sound of high-pitched metal, but several of them struck home in the flesh of the woman called Nora.

“Kuh!”

The woman pulled out a knife and grabbed at her wound.

“You'll pay for this!” she cursed, before leaping out of a window in the corridor.

“Cheh! Dammit, she got away. After her!”

“No, it's fine. The transmitter's already planted on her. Let us handle the tracking.”

Just as Mamina and the others were about to give chase, the voice that blended into the background chatter halted them in their tracks.

“Trance-meet-her?”

“Did you use the throwing knives I gave you? They’re the sort which leave their tips in the body even when you pull them out. Unless she cuts herself open and digs them out, the transmitter will tell us where she is, no matter where she flees.”

Mamina smiled.

“Which means it’s gone well, then?”

“Indeed. It doesn’t matter if she has to lick her wounds or report her failure, she still has to return to her hideout or base to do so. We can follow her trail from there to her nest. That’s our plan.”

“Then, can we leave the rest to you, Yanagida?”

“Ah, yes. Leave it to me... I’ll make sure they suffer.”

At the same time, there was the sound of a long-range remote-controlled drone taking off from somewhere within the courtyard of Chateau Formal.

“Do you understand, Delilah?”

A voice came from the speaker.

“Leave it to me, Master Yanagida. I will do anything you ask of me.”

As this shadow war unfolded, the pro-peace senators continued discussing the future of the Empire. To them, their tongues were weapons, while the great hall was the battlefield where they fought their war of words. Although it was not a matter of life and death, they were all struggling in their own way.

Cicero was feeling conflicted as he took a mouthful of wine as the bespectacled Catgirl maid Persia served him. His friend who was seated beside him chided:

“The taste doesn’t change even if a demihuman serves it, no?”

Indeed, this was terribly uncouth behavior for a guest. His friend saw this, and decided to warn him against it.

Cicero seemed to be trying to exonerate himself as he replied, “No, no,

it's not like that. I'm just wondering why the previous Count Formal would go against our tradition and hire demihuman girls. I used to think demihumans and the like were savages... forgive me. I had no intention of denigrating you."

After Cicero said that to Persia — who was still serving him — he continued, "I used to think that hiring demihumans signified a lack of taste. But after coming here and observing them, I feel it would be better for me to change that line of thought."

"Indeed. They are the equal of any human maid, be it in terms of etiquette or personality. In some ways, they are superior to human maids."

"That's right," Cicero nodded as he observed the demihuman maids working in the great hall.

The truth was, the maids of House Formal were not only capable, but beautiful. In addition, their ears were very keen, and they hardly missed anyone calling for them. In that respect, they were fundamentally different from human maids, who were very noisy and would not pay attention to people unless one shouted at them.

"Still, I can't get used to it. It just feels wrong to me."

Cicero shrugged as he revealed what was in his heart.

"Well, if it's a matter of getting used to it, then it's just takes time. Our armies would not even exist without demihumans. I heard that Zorzal's even been enlisting Giant Ogres into his battle lines."

"Ah, I know about that. Well, since I'll become accustomed to it sooner or later, I should probably bear with it. Still, can the maids here bear with me while I adjust?"

"It'll be fine, they're all very well-mannered. They will wait for you to become used to them. More importantly, we should listen to Sherry-san's report. She's returned after so long — shouldn't we hear what she has to say?"

Cicero nodded, and then he asked the scion of House Tuery before him:

“Forgive the delay. I hope you will tell us about what you saw in Nihon. Why don’t you start from the impending change in regime?”

“Yes, Cicero-sama.”

Sherry did not blanch, even while under the eyes of the senators.

She spoke directly and openly to the senators surrounding her.

“Firstly, I would like everyone to understand that the Prime Minister of Nihon is chosen by the senate. After that, the Prime Minister chooses his cabinet.”

“In other words, the Prime Minister represents the nation, and he is the man who is in charge of policy?”

“Yes. Japan’s current Senate is about to reach the end of its terms, and so they are preparing to select new councillors.”

The senators had bitter expressions on their faces. After all, they were in a similar situation.

“In other words, if the selected councillors change, then the nation’s policies might change as well?”

“Yes. In Japan, the senators are chosen by the people. Thus, it is possible for the makeup of the senators to suddenly change.”

Sherry had a bitter smile on her face as well, revealing her complex emotions. She knew that her fate depended heavily on the results of the change in Japan’s regime. Sherry had returned with Sugawara to impress this fact upon the senators.

“What an outdated institution. There were times when our Empire was a republic, but every time the office-holders changed, our diplomatic stance changed as well. This might be a big problem. This is why we’re pursuing the maintenance of the status quo.”

Perhaps it was because Sherry was still a child that Cicero’s explanation ended up sounding like that of a teacher. And perhaps it was because of that explanation that Sherry’s answer sounded like that of a model student answering her teacher.

“Indeed, the first citizen should hold the highest office.”

“Hm, it seems you’ve learned quite a lot. Then, can you summarize the Empire’s leadership for us?”

“Yes,” Sherry nodded. Then, she began narrating, as though from a textbook.

“The Emperor is responsible for the overall policy of the nation and its diplomacy. Domestic affairs are managed locally, by governors selected by the Emperor to administer domains on his behalf. In addition, the Empire has permitted certain cities with long and distinguished histories to rule themselves. Certain places which are not suitable for a limited-term regional governor, but which require long periods of acclimation — such as House Formal’s domain, which counts many races and tribes among its denizens — have been ceded to individuals who possess the requisite adaptability. This is the reason for the Empire’s centralization and compartmentalization of power.”

“Marvellous. If I were your tutor, I would praise you. Why did the Emperor of the time choose compartmentalization? What was the name of that Emperor?”

“Unfortunately, governors serving a limited term must sometimes leave their domain, and this leads to poverty and starvation more often than it does to prosperity. Thus, insurgency and insurrection breaks out. However, if that domain were to be part of one’s fortunes, one would have a vested interest in administering it carefully. This was the conclusion of Emperor Kaulas.”

“That is correct. Full marks.”

“I am very grateful.”

Sherry had a bashful smile on her face, like a student who had passed an interview.

“I did not expect a young girl like yourself to know that much. Governance is much like that; the key is to maintain coherence and continuity. Of course, there are many ways to do that, but to people who

must live on someone else's domain in difficulty, this is the most ideal method. Thus, a government whose national policies change with the wind is quite flawed. In particular, fickle diplomatic stances are quite disagreeable."

The hitherto silent Marquis Casel raised his hand.

"That's not right. One cannot say that democratically elected representatives are backward. After all, sometimes the Imperial succession comes into question."

"That's right, that's right," the surrounding senators nodded in agreement.

"You have it at that," Cicero nodded. Then, he countered:

"Well, a man ruling other men is bound to be flawed. Perhaps the pursuit of that nonexistent perfection is the very proof of our immaturity, as human beings."

Case's own rebuttal addressed the same topic Cicero had brought up.

"In any case, whether we are an Empire or a Republic, we must accept the flaws of both approaches as unavoidable. Since we value the continuity and instant deliberation of imperial rule, we have chosen to be an Empire. One could say that compensating for the flaws of such an institution is our duty as those who support it."

"I'd like to ask the two of you something. Do you consider the inability to prevent the rise of someone like Zorzal to be a flaw of the system?"

Cicero sternly answered the question from the floor:

"Do not try to foist off your flaws as the vulnerabilities of the regime. These matters have to be considered separately. Evaluating the Emperor's successor is our duty, after all. We ended up getting stuck in a vicious cycle of avoiding trouble and did not try hard enough to keep that man from the seat of power, instead taking him lightly."

"And we have paid for that in blood and suffering. The best proof of that is how we are looking dumbly at each other here."

However, Cicero shook his head and said, “No, not yet.”

“We have not paid it off yet. We are not even close. We must take the Empire back and return it to normal. Only after we do so can we say that we have paid the price for our failure.”

The senators immediately launched into a flurry of conversation.

“But how can we take the Empire back? Zorzal says he has abandoned the Capital, but he still controls the administration and the armies. His Majesty has declared that Zorzal be removed from the succession, but the men and generals of the armies still obey him.”

“He’s merely coercing them into servitude through force! All we need to do is inform the loyalist generals of His Majesty’s will and they will surely recant their ways.”

“No, don’t try to force the issue. Zorzal’s installed his ‘cleaners’ throughout the armed forces. They say that even the rank and file are under close scrutiny, to say nothing of the generals. Pointless rebellion against them will only result in the separation of head from body. It nearly happened to us too.”

The “cleaners” were the ones who denounced those who spoke out against Zorzal’s policies, analogous to political commissars. They were officially known as the Oprichniki, and they belonged to the Oprichnina. The pro-peace senators here had nearly been captured and purged by them.

“Then all we need to do is defeat them, right? Let’s all take the field and settle it once and for all!”

“But we are too few. The lines of battle are holding for now, but don’t forget that this is because Nihon is keeping Zorzal at bay.”

The resentment here fed off itself, and just as it looked like it was coming to a boil, Sherry asked, almost as though she were grumbling:

“Are the other countries and the vassals willing to help us?”

The girl’s voice was vastly different from the adults, so everyone here

clearly heard her words.

Ordinarily speaking, they would tell her to shut up while adults were talking. However, she felt like a student to them, so Cicero could not help but answer, though he felt it was a rude question.

“Naturally, we have sent envoys out. But all the other countries remain noncommittal. They appear to be content watching us beat each other up.”

In this way, the girl Sherry received the freedom to speak her mind in this place where she should have been forbidden to interrupt. In order to make sure of things, she purposely asked a question whose answer was obvious:

“His Majesty has taken a side, but the other countries have not done so. Why is that?”

“That is simple enough. If they stand by us and Zorzal wins, anyone who supported us will be destroyed. It is plainly obvious. This is a decision made with the fate of a nation at stake. It is only natural for them to be cautious about this.”

“In other words, we must show that we are able to win in order to obtain allies, then?”

“Correct. However, it is said that His Majesty’s health is failing, and we do not know when he will collapse again. In addition, Zorzal commands the armies.”

A noble by the side took a swig of wine and added:

“The regional governors are also following him.”

“How unfair,” Sherry pouted childishly.

“Zorzal holds the advantage, no matter how you slice it.”

“That much is true. However, the reason why the other nations have not joined Zorzal is because of the element of Nihon. Making an enemy of Nihon would be inadvisable, to say the least. However, Zorzal is obsessed with defeating Nihon. Thus, anyone joining Zorzal will end up at odds

with Nihon. Every nation dreads that prospect.”

“Which is why they are not siding with him,” Cicero shrugged as he ended his lecture.

“Thus, Nihon’s importance is rising rapidly, no?” Sherry continued on the topic of Japan.

“Correct. We know that Nihon has no intention of dominating the Empire. Fundamentally, they wish for us to rule the Empire, and maintain peaceful relationships with the other nations. I understand that this is not purely from the goodness of their hearts. After all, ruling a foreign people is a tiresome and expensive process. However, they are currently in the process of changing their Prime Minister. If that is the case, the attitude of that Prime Minister toward us is a matter of great interest. Sherry-kun, tell us honestly; what does Nihon think? Is there anything you have seen or heard that could shed more light on the matter?”

“Hmm~” Sherry hummed as she poked her face with her index finger.

“The people of Nihon are very angry with what Zorzal-sama has done. After all, the news of Zorzal-sama’s men attacking villages all over and trampling the innocent is common knowledge.”

And then, someone from the floor raised a question:

“However, I seem to recall Zorzal turning around and censuring Nihon, saying that the Imperial massacre of villagers was a fabrication and they were all done by the Jayesdeef.”

In truth, the news of soldiers in speckled green uniforms attacking villages had been spreading, and several nobles nodded as they heard this.

“They say that, but at the very least, the people of Arnus do not believe them. This is because there are many witnesses and pieces of evidence stating that Zorzal-sama was using bandits and demihumans to do his dirty work.”

“But the people of Arnus are all closely linked to Nihon. Can the words of these people be trusted?”

Nobody here was willing to believe that a fellow Imperial citizen like Zorzal would shamelessly accuse others of his own sins. Scorched-earth tactics were vicious, but they were also necessary. If they had to be done, then they had to be openly conducted. Nobody here wanted to believe that Zorzal had fallen so low that he would try to push the blame for that upon others.

However, Cicero raised a hand to quiet everyone.

“No. Piña-dono received a warning that Zorzal’s men intended to commit such deeds. Thus, though I find it hard to swallow, it was most likely his doing... I see. So he really does intend to defeat Nihon.”

Morality aside, sowing chaos with his attacks against the invaders was the correct answer.

When there was an overwhelming difference in combat ability, there was no other choice. His willingness to do anything for victory spoke of his determination to win.

However, this method would destroy everything.

This was because this strategy of deceiving people by pushing the blame to others would shatter the faith of the people and they would never again have faith in the nation.

Even if they had to resort to cruel methods, the Empire had always adopted the attitude of “Yes, I did this. Do you have a problem with that?” Although this might make people hate the Empire, it would also make them fear it, and thus they would submit.

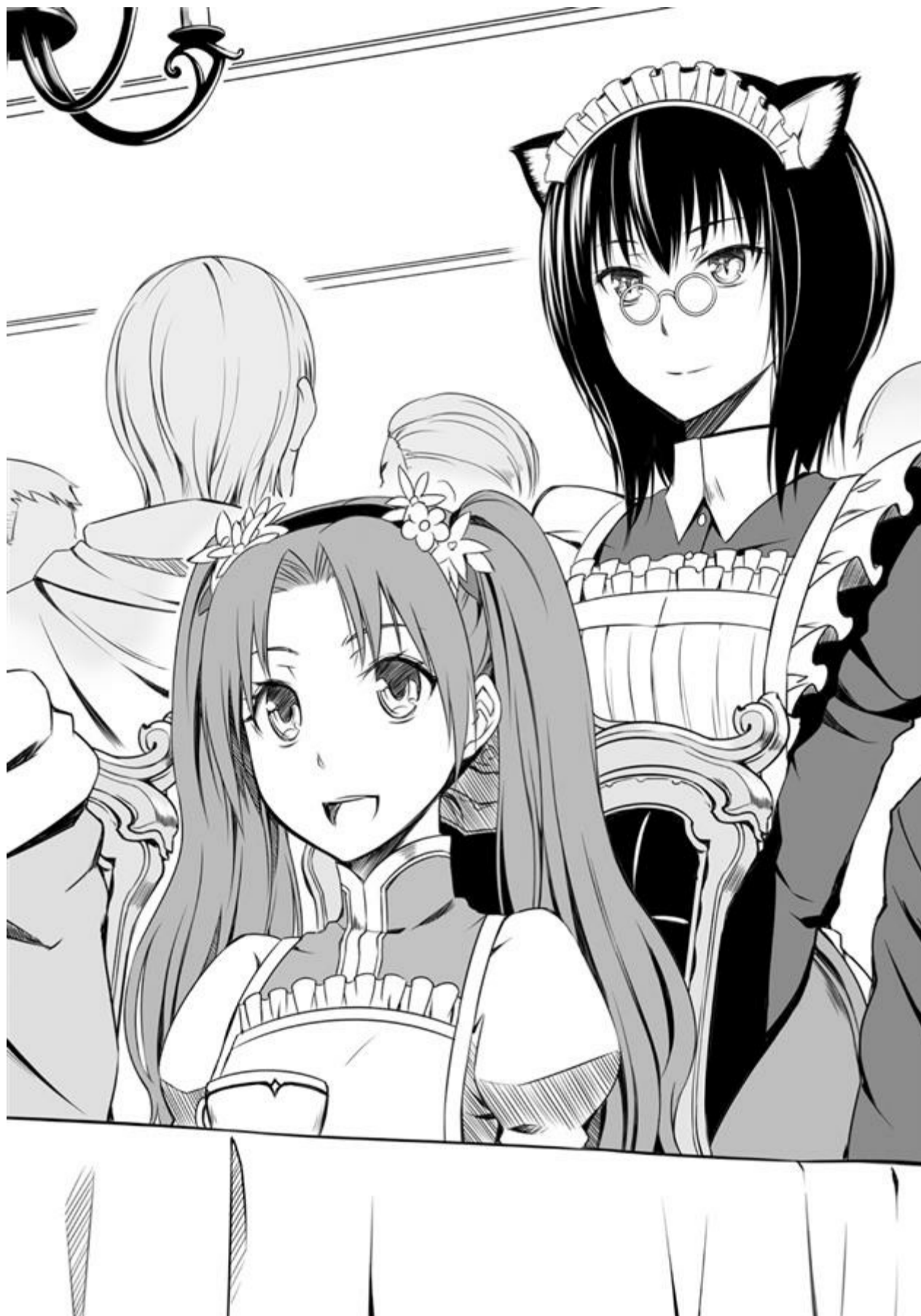
But what if they used deception?

The contradiction in what they had experienced and what the Empire said would make them doubt everything. Indeed, they would not be afraid, but apprehensive. Once that happened, ruling the country would be very difficult, even if they won.

If one wanted to rule a country by force, then a nation would need to adopt a policy of sealing the mouths of the people. It would need to trample on the hearts of others in order to keep the doubts in the people’s

hearts from turning into hatred and resentment. Thus, the nation had to make the people blindly believe that everything was the fault of external enemies.

The government would have to prevent the people from spreading hearsay, restrict idle conversation, tear out any insurgency by the roots and thoroughly dominate the people.



But such a nation would certainly have no freedom. Even drawing a breath would be difficult.

A lie had to be repeated often enough to be taken as the truth. The government would be forced to use all its strength to have a falsehood be taken as reality.

The government would then have to unceasingly attack anyone who spread the truth, and continuously spread its lies to the people.

Censorship of speech was the proof that lies were in circulation.

“What a frightening prospect.”

Cicero sighed as he despaired for the future of the Empire. Even if they could weather the storm that was Zorzal, he could not help but worry about how to rebuild the desolated Empire.

“If that is the case, we should hand the weighty duty of resisting Zorzal-sama to her Imperial Highness. May I know what Piña-sama is doing now, then?”

Sherry sought out Pina’s form among the people around her. However, depressed looks bloomed on the faces of the senators, and their representative Cicero.

“Her Highness has lost faith in the matter of politics. ‘Do you intend to have me commit fratricide?’ she said before leaving Italica.”

A shocked expression came over Sherry’s face. “So the great Imperial Princess was such a person?”

She knit her brows in displeasure.

“This is nothing short of desertion,” she continued. However, nobody heard that, because she spoke too softly. Then, she nonchalantly put on a cheerful smile.

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“Where is Her Highness now, then? Has anyone gone to fetch her?”

Fortunately, everyone who saw Sherry thought that her change of

expression was the result of their failing vision.

Cicero seemed to be one of them. He wiped his eyes, and answered:

“No, His Majesty ordered us not to bother with her for the time being. Her Highness should be travelling with the Men In Green now.”

“The Men In Green, huh...” Sherry mused as she tilted her head.

Chapter 2



Normally at this time, the sun would be shining brightly in the southern sky. However, the weather now was terrible. The sky was obscured by clouds and a light drizzle fell like mist, drenching the earth.

However, the men of the JGSDF did not have the habit of using umbrellas in their combat fatigues.

Itami was carrying a Type 64 sidearm and wearing body armor – among many other articles of equipment – as he prepared for his next mission beside a CH-47JA Chinook at Arnus' helipad.

That said, his resource-prospecting mission had not yet been terminated. He was still carrying out his prior assignment... in a broader sense. He was to serve as a guide for a group of academics from Japan as part of his prospecting mission.

His objective was called Kunapnui. It was a border region about 1000 kilometers to the northwest of Italica.

Thus, he was permitted to use a Chinook as a form of transportation.

The generous budgeting for the prospecting of resources made that possible. Although on some level it could be considered to be misappropriation of funds, all the paperwork had already been handled, so there should have been no objections to this. In addition, he would be accompanied by several reliable subordinates from his time in charge of 3rd Recon. Apart from Sergeant Major Kuwabara, there was Kurata, Katsumoto, Sasagawa and Kurokawa. Kuribayashi, Tomita, Tozu, Azuma, Nishina and the others had been assigned to protect members of the media, while Furuta was acting as a spy and thus not taking part in this operation.

In their place, he had been allowed to bring along local collaborators. Thus he had chosen Rory, Lelei, Tuka and Yao. Naturally, the four of them had immediately started packing their bags the moment they heard about the mission to Kunapnui. To them, travelling with Itami was not so much a natural thing but a privilege.

If anyone had any objections, they could be referred to the observers from the legitimate Imperial government who was accompanying them. That would be the Crown Princess and her female knight escort.

Naturally, the Crown Princess in question was Piña Co Lada.

“Ah, are you sure you want to come with us?”

In response to Itami’s question, Piña smiled as brilliantly as she could while clutching a 100 yen plastic umbrella.

“Of course; I have been pondering the revelation granted to us by Hardy, Lady of the Underworld.”

“Well, you say that, but I have no idea what she was getting at. I don’t think we need to trouble Your Highness in order to verify it.”

“But aren’t you going there anyway, Itami-dono?”

“Well, ah, yes. Orders are orders.”

“In other words, the government of Nihon takes a serious view of such things. Don’t you think it should be considered seriously, Itami-dono?”

Piña’s opinion of Itami remained as high as ever. This was because she was certain that something big must have happened if the Japanese government had dispatched Itami on this mission.

However, Itami did not think that the JSDF brass were taking this investigation that seriously. After all, they might have sent academic experts along, but the people they had chosen to accompany them were only around the same standard as himself.

The higher-ups probably felt they couldn’t just ignore this, so they decided to send someone over, Itami reasoned.

“Well, the earthquake and the abnormal alignment of the stars in the sky are all real enough. Since someone mentioned that these strange phenomena have been happening ever since our worlds were linked, we can’t ignore them, even if they’re “divine revelations”. Particularly because Hardy-sama seems closely tied to the Gate.”

“Then I must go in person to verify the cause of these oddities, whether it is the earthquake or something else entirely.”

Piña took a step towards Itami, looking at him with a little resentment.

“Also... I tire of matters of governance. I have received nothing but blame for everything I have done for the Empire’s future, so I no longer

wish to involve myself in it. If I stay with Father, I will only be drawn into more political conflicts.”

“But aren’t you already the Crown Princess, your Highness?”

“I do not recall accepting that title. Father gave me that title of his own accord and told everybody else.”

“Still, His Majesty’s health is in grave condition. Should anything happen, you are the only person who will be able to assume the mantle of leadership, Your Highness. Isn’t it better ...

Piña pursed her lips and puffed up her cheeks.

“Do you think of me as a burden, Itami-dono?”

“Er, well, I wouldn’t quite put it that way...”

Itami hurriedly tried to placate her, but Piña’s expression was one of a girl whose lover had mentioned the topic of breaking up. She covered her sorrow-filled face with both her hands.

“Uwah, do I exist only to be conveniently rescued?!”

“It’s not like that!”

“Then why are you so cold-hearted and merciless, Itami-sama?”

“...Er, are you by any chance throwing a tantrum?”

“Do you even need to ask?! After being abandoned by my elder brother, plunged into the abyss of despair, and roundly castigated by the pro-war faction, the hand which you extended to me was like a ray of light in the darkness, Itami-dono. It seemed as though you glowed with a halo from behind your back. In that moment, I felt that I must offer my all to you – no, that I wanted you to utterly claim me. I believe that is a common trope in Risa-sama’s works, as a lead-in to domination scenarios. My heart pounded mightily. Honestly, it was too moe. I am ashamed that I am not a man.”

“Hrk!”

That pronouncement drew a series of reactions from around Itami.

For a moment, silence reigned. Right after that, a spine-chilling air surrounded Rory, Lelei, Tuka and Yao.

“No, no, I personally think it would be great if you could remain a lady. I’m not interested in doing that sort of thing with men, so please, give me a break!”

“When you shouted ‘Piña! Come!’ I thought... I thought...”

“Did I say that? Really?”

Itami glanced back at Lelei and Rory – who were busy with travel preparations – to verify if he had indeed said such a thing.

Lelei was silent, as though the question was not worth answering. She headed to the rear hatch of the Chinook, clutching her luggage.

Rory and Tuka – who looked like teruterubozu in their ponchos – seemed to be huddling with Yao and discussing something. Whispers and fragments conversation containing words like “Homo” and “Shudo” came up.

(TL Note: teruterubozu are the Japanese fine weather dolls which look like ghosts, while shudo is the ancient samurai form of faggotry)

“...And, and, and even after all that...”

“After all what?”

“When I learned that you had only rescued me because I was along the way, I did not know whether to feel disappointed or neglected. The knowledge that I had been so casually treated filled me with despair! Did you know that?!”

“Haa... ah, it’s a bit hard to imagine.”

“Indeed, indeed! Could it be so easily imagined?!”

“Then... do you want me to know? Or is it better that I do not know?”

“Of course I want you to know!”

“Okay, I get that...”

“No, I don’t want you to know so easily. As if you’d understand the

humiliation that I went through!”

“Then what do you want me to do?!”

Piña bit her lip with a “hmpf” as Itami shouted in exasperation. Then, she forced herself to say:

“I hope you can follow my words. First, imagine me on my knees, both hands pressed to the ground, my head lowered in resignation. Then, I rise to my feet, my chest held high, wailing loudly and cursing myself. That is a rough approximation of my misery.”

“So I just have to imagine that?”

Itami’s well-honed imagination immediately began visualizing the scene as she had requested.

“Yes, and please be sure to dwell on the suffering I had to endure. Just like how I am in the rain today... no, imagine my form, drenched by rain and mud as the torrential rain churns the ground into a swamp.”

“Mud and a storm... is it?”

“Indeed. Mud symbolizes humiliation. Make sure to imagine my hair soaked by rain and my hands trembling as they dig into the ground. My nails should be broken and bleeding profusely due to clawing at the soil.”

“Urk... that sounds painful.”

Piña and Itami groaned together, rubbing their fingertips as they did. Their overdeveloped imaginations – though derived from different sources – produced a palpable sensation of pain.

“Umu, that does hurt. Let’s keep the fingernails on,” Piña relented.

It was only when she said those words that Itami realized that Piña was not speaking from personal experience. Well, to be fair, he had already realized that, but pointing it out from the beginning would be rude.

“Which means that it didn’t actually happen?”

“Well, if it did, wouldn’t it be dirty and painful? No – the resentment was real, so much so that I beat up my pillow. And my tears got it wet too.”

“So your pillow is the enemy now?”

Itami imagined Piña’s fists going “boff boff” as she beat up her pillow.

He visualized her in a princess-like white dress. But after considering that she was drenched by the rain, he reasoned that he would be able to glimpse her body through the translucent fabric.

“Don’t imagine the part about the pillow! There’s pouring rain and mud everywhere, staining my body! Don’t leave that out!”

Itami corrected his mental image in accordance with Piña’s request.

“Well then. Can you imagine the sheer suffering your cold ruthlessness caused me, Itami-dono?”

“

“

Itami was at a loss for words, so he tried to continue his visualization. Yet, it seemed to be heading in a lewd direction.

Suddenly, Itami glanced at Piña. She seemed to be looking forward to his reaction. In order to gauge what sort of reaction was appropriate, he asked: “May I know our current situation now?”

“You were about to admit your mistakes and apologize, then offer up your sword to me in a pledge of loyalty, Itami-dono.”

“My... mistakes?”

“Indeed, Lord Itami.”

“But I have no sword or anything like that.”

“Then your sidearm will do.”

“Ah... that’s right. I need to give orders to my people.”

Itami tried to use speaking to his subordinates as an excuse to flee.

However, they did not need his directions at all. They had already begun moving stacks of canvas, inspecting their personal equipment and ensuring they had enough food and water, even without detailed

instructions.

In order to avoid being drawn into this mess, they turned their backs on Itami, as though to say, “we’re very busy”. While that was certainly a possibility, it was most likely not the case. At least, that was what Itami thought.

Still, he could not interrupt them while they were focused on their work. That being the case, he could still... yes, he had to take care of Hamilton, the female knight accompanying Piña. This should have been the first time she was taking a plane, so he would need to take the appropriate action.

In truth, she faced a rather severe problem.

There was still some time until takeoff, but she was already on one of the Chinook’s jump seats. Her body was stiff and she looked nervous.

She had taken shelter inside the craft to avoid the rain, but the reason for her stiffness was immediately apparent, judging by her wail of “I can’t believe a big lump of metal like this can go into the sky!”

“Can’t we go by horse, your Highness? Let’s take our time going to Kunapnui by land!”

She sounded like a condemned criminal being strapped into the electric chair.

“...Hmm~”

Itami was starting to have his doubts about speaking to her. Piña herself was pointedly avoiding Hamilton’s line of sight.

“It looks so heavy already and now you’re filling it with even more things? How is it even going to float through the air?!”

Everyone seemed to be thinking the same thing, which was why they turned their backs on Hamilton.

Amidst shouts of “Please stop! Give me a break! Don’t put in anything else!”, Kurata, Katsumoto and one of the airmen continued their task of loading up the helicopter.

Lelei was helping as well. She glanced briefly at the pale and trembling knight before heading to the Chinook's cockpit.

Her face was always expressionless, so there was no way of telling how Lelei felt. However, she did not look like she was about to explain the principles of flight to Hamilton and thus ease her fears.

Her attention was focused on the aircraft personnel, who were conducting their preflight checks.

After entering the cockpit, she studied the interior closely, as though she wanted to cling to the pilots' backs. The look on her face was like a puppy waiting for treats.

Once she had learned how to drive the HMTV, Lelei's interest had turned toward the various vehicles the JSDF had brought to the Special Region, such as their bulldozers, the XLR250R motorcycles, and so on.

Much like with the bulldozer and the motorcycle, she was waiting for them to ask, "Do you want to try the driver's seat?"

However, they could not let this girl into the pilot's seat. While they knew that Lelei – a technical specialist – had experience driving a HMTV, riding a bike across the wilderness and flattening out the earth with a bulldozer, they could not allow just anybody to operate an aircraft. This was a legal issue. There was a limit to how much the rules could be bent, even if they were in the Special Region.

Lelei seemed to understand that as well, so she did not actually say that she wanted to pilot the helicopter. Instead, she used her eyes to convey her thoughts. The truth was, despite her lack of outward emotion and speech, Lelei was a hot-blooded girl who communicated through body language.

The airmen keenly felt Lelei's hot gaze burning into them, and her close attention put them on edge. The way she scrutinized every little thing they did was as though they were taking an exam.

"Ah, you seem to be looking closely at all of this – is it so interesting?" one of the pilots asked.

"I was thinking about how to apply it to magic," Lelei replied.

Then, she nonchalantly continued, “I believe it should be possible to fly with magic.”

“Well, if you can do that, you’d become a real magical girl.”

Everyone felt the same way.

That said, if that topic had been brought up before now, they would have suggested to Lelei, “You should be riding a broom instead, right?” After all, “magic users” + “flying = broom” was an iconic image that came up when one thought of novels, movies, anime and manga.

However, she shut down everyone who brought the subject up with a flat “No”. In addition, she directed a reproachful look at them, as though to say, “A broom? What are you on about? You want a girl to ride such a slim thing? Are you retarded? Are you tired of living? Are you a pervert?” and so on.

When Itami heard about this, he told Lelei, “Well, I’ve seen anime and manga where they had things called training brooms, which were actually metal bars”, in an attempt to explain why everyone thought that way.

At that time, Lelei had stared at the broom Itami had handed her, then indicated that she understood before telling her own side of the story.

“It would definitely hurt. I don’t like it... and I don’t want to get used to it.”

Itami nodded in response.

“Well yeah, I wouldn’t ride a bike whose seat was changed out for a bar. My butt would hurt...”

When one thought about it calmly, it was a perfectly reasonable conclusion to reach.

And so, nobody asked Lelei to ride a broom any more. The very idea was ripped out by the roots and eradicated. And now, she was staring at the Chinook pilots with a “jiiiiiiii~” expression.

The pilots felt her eyes burning into their backs, but they paid it no heed and continued their work.

Pilots went through extremely harsh training. However intense the motivation which led them to join the JSDF and throw themselves into their training, they would still be coldly rejected with a “We do not need you” if they could not complete their courses within the allocated timeframe.

Only people who could surpass that strait gate could earn their wings.

The foundation of their pride was their skills, earned through blood, sweat and tears. If their skills could not pass the inspection of a magical girl from the Special Region, they would not have a leg to stand on. The memories of their harsh training flashed past their eyes.

They had to satisfy Lelei’s expectations to maintain their pride. They had to show that ardent gaze of hers that this was what flying was about, that this was how one flew, constantly demonstrating their technique and mastery to her.

Thus, the atmosphere in the cockpit was quite intense. It radiated an air that made everyone unwilling to approach. Itami felt that going in there would be a bad idea.

In other words, there was no port for Itami to take shelter from the storm.

“Itami-dono, won’t you say something?”

Itami went “Uh,” as Piña approached him.

“Come on,” Piña said as she drew closer.

“No, ah, about that...” Itami continued retreating.

“Come on, come on, come on...”

With every step Piña took towards him, Itami took one backwards.

“Ahem!”

Sergeant-Major Kuwabara coughed very deliberately to get their attention, before straightening his back and issuing an order.

“Fall in!”

Kurata and the others formed up in front of him, chests upthrust.

Overjoyed at this sudden rescue, Itami snapped off a textbook salute before proceeding to report to Lt. Gen. Hazama, who had appeared before them. Piña looked vaguely resentful, but now was not the time to worry about her.

“Preparations to move out are complete!”

“Mm, good work.”

Hazama had no desire to cling to formalities. He introduced Itami and the others to the aged but robust-looking men beside him, as well as the television studio’s cameraman and the rest of the press team.

“This is Professor Urushibata of Kyoto University’s Xenobiology department, and this is Professor Shirai from the National Astronomical Observatory of Japan. This is Professor Youmei of Todai, who specializes in theoretical physics. And then there is Kuribayashi Nanami-san of the press team.”

“My name is Urushibata.”

“I am Shirai.”

“I am known as Youmei.”

“And I’m Kuribayashi Nanami. Thank you for taking care of my Nee-san.”

“Eh~ is the media coming with us? Nobody told me about that...”

Youmei roared at Itami’s reply: “How could the mass media not pay attention when I take the field?!”

In truth, this was the first time academics had been allowed into the Special Region.

“We won’t get in your way,” the younger Kuribayashi pleaded with her hands together. All they could do was take her word for it.

To the side, Youmei was griping to Hazama about “Why did you delay my introduction until the end” and so on.

“I bear a doctorate of Tokyo University; the vocational field of a curriculum vitae only needs to have one of these four entries in it: teaching assistant at Tokyo University, lecturer at Tokyo University, assistant professor at Tokyo University or professor at Tokyo University. Do not mention me in the same breath as the rest of those riffraff.”

Hazama began to tremble and sweat as he apologized to Urushibata and Shirai, who Youmei was pointing at. He hurriedly wiped his forehead off with a handkerchief and then replied: “Sempai, you were a schoolmate of mine, so I had to consider the matter from many angles. I hope you will forgive me for introducing you last.”

At this, Youmei’s attitude suddenly changed.

“What, you are an alumnus of Tokyo University?”

“Yes, although I was five batches removed from yourself, sempai.”

“Ohhh, I see, I see. So you thought of me as part of the family. Then it cannot be helped. After all, one seats one’s family at the rearmost tables at a wedding... mm, so you saw me as kin. Ahahaha!”

Youmei’s heart seemed to have grown three sizes all of a sudden, as though he was pleased by something.

Then, he suddenly turned his attention elsewhere, slowly discarding his umbrella. Then, he crawled upon the ground and beat at the soil of Arnus, shouting “Mumumumu, are we riding this?!”

As he peeked into the Chinook, Hamilton was scared stiff, but the spike in her heart rate showed no signs of ending.

Urushibata paid no heed to Youmei’s rudeness and strange behavior, but instead observed the scenery of the Special Region. From time to time, he stared at Tuka and Yao’s bodies.

“Hohoho... I see. It would seem that hypothesis was correct – in an Earth-like habitat, the lifeforms which develop will tend to be similar to human beings...”

Professor Urushibata delivered his analysis as he paced back and forth

while inspecting them. The two of them were startled by the way he was staring at them and looks of fear bloomed on their faces.

Usually speaking, Yao would be deeply offended by someone who eyed her with lust, and she would seek to either scare him straight or beat him up. However, the way Urushibata looked at her was far removed from the lewd gaze a man had for a woman, so she was lost as to how to respond.

Indeed, he was looking at her in the way a researcher would appraise an excellent specimen.

Itami and the others thought, "I hope he doesn't want to dissect Tuka and Yao."

Perhaps they should have expected that, but Urushibata said, "Ah, Hazama-kun~ can we bring these two back with us?"

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Urushibata-sensei. The two of them are local collaborators."

"Is that so? What a shame."

The others almost asked, "What's a shame?!"

Around this time, the third academic Shirai was taking pictures of the region around Arnus while holding a tripod frame which had a reflecting telescope on a manual equatorial mount. Perhaps he was a collector of some sort, but the camera he was using was the film-using kind, which was quite uncommon in this day and age.

"If only the rain would stop soon. Muhuhuhuhu, what will the sky of the Special Region be like? I'll snap it all up!"

Each of them was quite a character. They were all bizarre in their own way.

"Are these... teachers in a university?"

Hazama replied, "Mm, yes... Probably. I guess." It was a voice that was at odds with his usual regal bearing.

Then, what exactly had happened which required a group of academics to travel to Kunapnui, which was deep in the Special Region? To answer that question, we must turn back time to when Itami and the others had gone to the Belnago Shrine.

After learning from Gray and the others that assassins were going after Lelei, Itami decided not to stay in Londel and instead decided to run around doing whatever he wanted.

His logic was that as long as they kept on the move, the assassins could not catch up with them, no matter how many were sent against them. This method of thinking was largely correct. The only way to catch up with them was if their pursuers had predicted where they would go and stolen a march on them. However, Itami was the sort who took operational security seriously, and he had put some thought into this.

“We’ll head here next, then.”

Roughly 50 miles to the west of Londel, Itami – who had finished collecting mineral samples from an abandoned copper mine with Lelei and her stepsister Arpeggio – raised a stick up on a map, holding it in place with his index finger.

“I’m letting go!”

Yes, he was going to decide their future direction by following the direction in which a stick fell.

However, simply holding it up with his entire hand ran the risk of unconsciously influencing the direction in which it fell, so his idea was to support it with one finger, then close his eyes before turning a circle around it first.

In addition, he had resolved himself to go where the stick went, regardless of where it pointed.

Of course, strictly following that rule would lead to running around in circles in the desert. Thus, they still went in the general direction the stick pointed, but they were flexible enough to allow themselves to gravitate toward nearby settlements and the like. That said, since the direction that

was chosen was essentially random, no more assassins targeting Lelei had appeared before them.

Everyone looked as one to the stick as it fell.

“Bearing 326... looks like north-northwest,” Itami said as he consulted his compass on the stick’s direction.

“North-northwest?” Rory asked, as she stared in puzzlement at what should have been a chance occurrence. Then, she studied the others’ faces as she asked, “Did a queer wind just blow past?”

“I don’t think so... at least, I didn’t feel any wind.”

Itami was seated on the ground, studying the opened map and paying attention to where bearing 326 would take them. He looked up as he heard Rory’s question, and thus his forehead nearly touched Rory’s face.

“Really?”

Rory tilted her head. She was a Demigoddess, after all, and she seemed to have sensed something imperceptible to humanity.

“Well, perhaps the wind might have blown the stick a certain way, but is that a bad thing?”

Tuka raised her head as she said this. Her face was also very close by.

“Hm~” Rory hmped, then looked down, beside Itami.

“Still, that takes us to Belnago. I don’t like the sound of that.”

If one traced a line on the map and swept it out... they would soon pass through the region marked as Belnago. In Rory’s opinion, it was far too accurate to be a coincidence, and so she felt that someone had a hand in this.

Itami felt that it might not be so, even if Rory said that. Still...

“Well, I was invited to the Belnago Shrine, so at some point I’ll have to go there. Is anything wrong with that?”

The invitation in question sat within their luggage. An inauspicious aura hung about it.

It was a scroll parchment, dyed black with what looked like dried blood. Someone had written on it with ink that appeared to have been made of some kind of litharge.

The contents were an invitation for Itami – who had defeated the Flame Dragon and fought off the Apostle Giselle with his might – to visit the shrine. Even the sealing wax was black. If this was a sign of the author's sense of humor, it must have been very dark indeed. Although it was written in a business-like style, he felt like burning it after reading it just once. Incidentally, it was because of this item that they had considered visiting Belnago in the first place.

“Rory, didn't you say you were going to tell that goddess Hardy that you weren't going to marry her? I believe Yao wanted to sever ties with her as well.”

“That's right. However, I have a bad feeling about what will happen if I go now. She'll probably call up those assassins and the like as well.”

“I concur with her Holiness' opinion,” Yao said, showing her doubts about the goddess she had once worshipped.

She had renounced her faith after learning that her fellow Dark Elves were used to feed the Flame Dragon.

Gods existed in the Special Region, and there were many of them. It was quite natural for worshippers to pray to those gods that aligned with their beliefs and abandon those which they no longer favored. This was completely different from a certain narrow-minded, monotheistic faith that revered a totalitarian deity, which split its adherents into several sects and let them fight among themselves, and which counted apostasy as a mortal sin.

“Then... should we try again?”

As she heard the suggestion which came from Shandy Kaf Marea, Tuka immediately nodded in agreement. Itami slowly nodded as well, and erected the stick again.

He closed his eyes, turned a circle, and released his finger.

And then, the stick pointed to...

“.....”

“.....”

“North-northwest, huh.”

Gray Co Aldo seemed to speak for the speechless group.

“What should we do~”

“Try it again.”

Itami let the stick go again.

“.....”

After seeing the results, Lelei looked away and sighed.

“You know, they say Belnago has really good food,” Arpeggio said to Gray. She probably felt that going to Belnago was a done deal, so she began talking about the news surrounding that place.

“Let’s, let’s try one more time.”

Itami held up the stick, and this time, he leaned it toward the south.

Then, he closed his eyes and let go.

As expected, gravity pulled the stick toward the south. However, a gale unexpectedly blew at the stick, so that it landed pointing north-northwest.

“.....”

“.....”

“Har— Hardy, damn you...”

Rory kicked the stick.

“Owie!” Itami yelped as it bounced off a tree and hit Itami on the forehead. It was still pointing north-northwest from its resting place on the ground.

Itami rubbed his aching head and picked up the stick.

“Everyone! Let’s look at this differently. This stick doesn’t point north-

northwest, but south-southeast.”

Itami indicated the thicker end of the stick, implying that since it was not an arrow, either end could be used as the head.

It sounded pretty forced, but everyone applauded in approval, saying “That’s a pretty good idea...”

However, a gust of wind came before that sentence could be completed. It turned the stick, pointing it north-northwest.



“Kuh...”

When Itami had chosen this method of deciding their direction, he had declared that he would go in the direction it indicated, no matter how harsh the route. He had been joking back then, but it had been a promise.

Lelei patted at her knees, swiping the dirt off before getting into the

driver's seat of the HMTV and starting the engine. Tuka and Rory got on, looking dead inside.

"It can't be helped, I guess. Let's take care as we move off."

Thus did Itami and his company set off toward the Belnago Shrine.

Belnago.

It was a temple city that was famous as being consecrated to Hardy, the Goddess of the Underworld.

Typically, one associated the Underworld with the final destination of the deceased. It made one think of the afterlife, and it was located deep underground.

That said, not everybody who died went to the Underworld. The souls of those who fell in battle, or who had performed sufficient feats of arms were instead summoned to the throne of Emroy.

In that sense, there were other places for the dead to go besides the Underworld, but on a whole, those were very rare exceptions. Under normal circumstances, the souls of the deceased would be drawn to the Underworld which Hardy ruled. Thus, Hardy's shrine was often visited by those who did not primarily worship Hardy, but who wished to pray for the souls of their parents and grandparents. As one might expect, this meant that Belnago was full of activity, thanks to the hordes of worshippers which flocked to it.

"That sure is a lot of people," Itami murmured as he observed the throng milling around before the shrine.

After securing their lodgings and parking the HMTV, they took to the streets, which were packed with worshippers. It was comparable to a shrine being packed for Hatsumode.

(TL Note: Hatsumode is the Japanese New Year visit to a shrine to pray for good luck)

The stalls and shops before the shrine were targeted at visitors, and they

were similarly filled. It looked just like a scene from Sugamo's Jizo-dori, the front of Kawasaki Daishi, or the Kaminarimon at Sensoji.

(TL Note: Jizo-dori is a shopping district in Toshima, Tokyo. Kawasaki Daishi is another name for the Heiken-ji, a temple in Kawasaki. Sensoji is Tokyo's oldest temple, in Asakusa)

Shrines were typically associated with a stern and grave atmosphere, which made people uncomfortable. The fact that this place was unexpectedly worldly put Itami at ease.

There were cheap wooden accessories everywhere, sold by the local souvenir stores. There were also metal chalices and carvings of the scenery, each stamped with the mark of Belnago Shrine.

They were instantly recognizable as true souvenirs, given their cheapness and decorative nature.

In addition, there were racks adorned with ores from various mines, which were being sold as souvenirs as well.

There were things like crystals, lapis lazulis, jades and other precious stones, as well as their ores. There were colorful, banded stones of unknown provenance, each with a price tag of their own.

Itami was about to ask why these things were being sold as Belnago's souvenirs. After hearing Arpeggio's explanation, he could only nod and say, "I see". In short, Hardy had jurisdiction over everything under the ground, so the ores extracted from there could be seen as the bounty of the Queen of the Underworld. Thus, every city that operated a mine worshipped Hardy, and offered their ores and minerals to the shrine as a tithe, which only served to enrich the shrine's coffers. Any excess was sold on the market as souvenirs, like they were now.

Alfie (Arpeggio's nickname) and Shandy immediately started browsing the wares on sale. The ores in particular were an unexpected find for Arpeggio, who could use them as research specimens, and even her eyes had changed at this.

However, Rory urged Itami and the others on toward the temple. Not

wanting to be left behind, Shandy and Arpeggio followed them, though they cast longing looks at what they were leaving behind.

As Lelei saw this, she said, “You don’t have to follow us. Wait for us in the inn after you finish shopping.”

It might have sounded like a cold abandonment, but Arpeggio understood that Lelei wanted them to enjoy themselves shopping. Still, she shook her head.

“As if I could. This is a golden opportunity to witness the innermost sanctum of Belnago Shrine; how could I pass it up?”

She put her arms around her little sister’s shoulders and pulled her close.

“For all we know, it might end up being the subject of a research paper, no?”

Alfie was a mineral researcher, so to her, Hardy was like the keeper of a storehouse of treasures. Thus, it only made sense to stay in her good books.

On the other hand, there was Itami, who had long been conditioned to seek the end of a line whenever he saw one. He looked around and asked Rory:

“Hey, Rory, is it okay if we don’t queue up?”

“It’ll be fine. Don’t you have that invitation from Belnago?”

“Ahh, yes, I do.”

Itami produced the black scroll from his backpack.

“The priests will show us the way as long as we have this.”

“I see. So this is like a pass for a tour group, or something.”

And indeed, just as Rory had said, it had a remarkable effect on the attendants standing by the main door. The exquisitely beautiful clerics in their white-ruffled priestess’ dresses were stunned as though stricken by lightning, following which their skirts swished as they genuflected before

him.

It would seem this scroll was far beyond a mere tour group pass.

“Uwah, that’s amazing.”

The fact that he was now a supremely important guest seemed to have gotten to Itami a little.

“Let’s try it again,” he said as he revealed the scroll once more.

The priestesses genuflected before him as they had earlier. It was as though they were wicked officials who had beheld an incognito lord’s badge of office.

(TL Note: This refers to the period drama called Mito Komon, where a former daimyo travels incognito, finds corrupt officials through their misdeeds, and subdues them by flashing his intro.)

Just as he was about to brandish the jet-black scroll one more time, Rory bonked him on the head with the hilt of her halberd.

(TL Note: A reference to the line “控えおろう”, also from Mito Komon)

“Ow...”

“How much longer are you going to play around? Let’s go.”

Itami clutched his head as Rory dragged him by the sleeve.

And so, Itami and company received special treatment from the priestesses in white goth outfits as they were ushered into Belnago Shrine.

Simply put, one could describe the shrine as a vast cave.

It was comparable to an inverted pyramid. It was essentially a huge mound that had been flipped over.

Of course, it was not simply a hole excavated in the ground. If that were the case, the shrine would flood whenever it rained. Thus, there were large stone pillars everywhere with support beams between them, supporting a gigantic ceiling that covered the pit. The actual altar to Hardy was located in the deepest reaches of the hole, where the apex of the inverted pyramid would be.

It would seem this was as far as regular worshippers could go.

Priestesses clad in white goth outfits stood in a line before the altar, dispensing blessings upon the worshippers in the form of words. Itami and his group could hear things like “May you be blessed” as they drew near.

However, the white goth priestesses ushered them even further within.

If one looked carefully, one could see a narrow set of stairs which extended deep into the earth. Those steps faded into darkness and nothing could be seen further in.

That must be the true altar; in other words, the entrance to the Underworld.

Up till now there had been no sense of claustrophobia, because the ceiling was high and broad. However, they were actually going underground now. Itami was not a tall person, but he could not help but shrink as he thought of how low the ceiling of the tunnel would be.

Rory and the others had the mournful expressions of non-swimmers who were being forced into the water. He could imagine them squeezing their eyes shut, pinching their noses, taking a deep breath, and then jumping into a bottomless pool.

“Are you alright, Rory? You’re just not used to the underground, right?”

“Under normal circumstances, entering the domain ruled by another god would cause all sorts of problems. But, but this is different. We have Hardy’s personal invitation, so it should be fine...”

Her forced voice squeaked a little towards the end, so it hardly sounded convincing.

Rory seemed to be very bothered by the matter of going underground, trespassing in another god’s territory aside. Thus, when Itami took the lead and said, “I’ll go in front”, Rory sighed in audible relief. Then, she drew up behind him, clinging to the hem of his uniform.

Itami led the group down the long, long stairs.

After descending through what seemed like the interior of a pyramid for about five minutes, they came to a large, open chamber.

It was a gigantic shrine. Countless pillars stood within the vast underground space. The scale of the place was comparable to the interior of the Metropolitan Area Underground Discharge Tunnel. That in turn made Itami think of the atmosphere surrounding the passage which led to the volcanic lair of the Flame Dragon.

Now that the ceiling was high again, Rory seemed much less tense, and even had a relaxed expression on her face as she looked around. That said, she had not once let go of Itami's shirt.

A stern pronouncement issued from the altar at the heart of the shrine:

"You visitors. The goddess Hardy makes her advent. Pay your homage unto her."

A ray of divine light tore through the darkness and illuminated the altar, and as one, the priestesses genuflected before it.

Rory sank the spiked head of her halberd into the ground and went to one knee.

Itami hesitated, and then saluted. He rarely performed a 45-degree bow, so that was not his first reaction. Tuka and Lelei did as the priestesses did, while Gray and Shandy touched their hands to their chests, in the salute of the Imperial Army.

Before long, a mote of radiance descended from somewhere near the ceiling. That point of light reshaped itself into the form of a woman.

Itami wondered if this was some sort of movie special effect or CGI. Unable to resist his curiosity, he glanced behind to see if there was a projector there.

However, there was no beam of light that betrayed the presence of a cinema film projector, and there were no mechanisms in the shrine's floor or ceiling which he could see.

It soon resolved itself into the form of a woman in her twenties, with

silver hair reaching down to her waist.

Her serene expression was like an exquisitely-carved piece of glass, while her slender curves were a simple yet elegant illustration of the feminine form.

She stepped forth silently.

In that instant, the green eyes of Hardy met with Itami's, as though they were drawn in.

She smiled gently, and the fingertips of her right hand moved, delivering a tiny greeting. It seemed like a performer on stage waving to a friend she had found in the audience, and Itami could not help but panic.

After all, Itami did not have a particularly good impression of Hardy after the Flame Dragon incident. But it was nice to have a beautiful woman smile at him, and the atmosphere in this place was quite sacrosanct and all. He had once thought she was arrogant, domineering, and unreasonable, but now he felt that she was direct and honest instead, which strangely endeared her to him.

Hang on a bit, he thought.

According to what Rory had said, the gods determined the forms they took by their own will. That would mean Hardy had most likely not been born with that perfect body of hers. Itami considered the fact that even the smallest cosmetic changes – made over and over again – might result in onlookers being unable to tell what a person originally looked like. Plastic surgery and the like was commonplace in Japan, so it was quite likely that Hardy was an artificial beauty.

Hardy then took on a hurt look, as though she had not been expecting that. She then turned to Rory and said something to her. Regretfully, Itami and the others could not hear their conversation, and Rory herself was silent, as though ignoring Hardy. It looked like a muted television drama.

Hardy's eyes filled with tears and her movements became frantic, and she gesticulated at Itami while pleading silently with Rory.

Eventually, Itami began to feel sorry for her. Since she was pointing at

him, it must have something to do with him. At the very least, he wanted to know what she wanted.

“Rory, what is the goddess-sama saying?”

Rory sighed, as though to say “give me a break”, before replying, “She wants me to tell you that it isn’t plastic surgery.”

Itami realised that it was probably not the best choice of words. He lowered his head and replied, “Ah, sorry about that.”

Then he realised something:

“Does that mean you can read minds?”

So you do understand, Hardy’s face seemed to say as it blossomed into a radiant smile. She nodded to Itami in approval.

In all honesty, how many men would not feel guilty with a beautiful woman before them and their hearts laid bare?

Given that she was possessed of such bewitching beauty, it would be bad if she realised what they were thinking. Of course, there were some people who might not care, but Itami was an honest man, and he sighed, “I can’t think of stupid things any more...”

Hardy covered her smirk as she saw the change in Itami’s attitude. Then, she said something else, but Itami could not hear her. Rory, on the other hand, seemed thoroughly unhappy and refused to communicate, so Hardy trailed off halfway and looked around, as though searching for something.

Following that, the priestesses advanced in unison, as though they had been waiting for this. They looked upon their goddess with expressions which seemed to say “Please choose me.”

“Er, what are they doing?” Itami asked as he leaned down towards Rory.

“They’re saying, ‘Please make use of my body’, or something like it.”

“Body? Is that like possession or something?”

Itami thought of Kyoyama Itako or Himiko, famous miko of their periods.

Spirits and divinities could not directly interfere with humanity, but by borrowing the bodies or mouths of mikos, they could interact with the world of mankind.

“Becoming one with one’s god is arguably the highest honor for any priest...”

“Really now...”

“However, taking such a mighty soul into one’s body will generally break one’s mind, so it’s like committing suicide...”

“That’s bad. That’s terrible,” Itami said.

To Itami, one had to be alive to enjoy honors and whatnot. A corpse could not enjoy the glory it was covered in.

“Still, they’re priests; they’ve accepted that.”

“Why do they want to do this?”

“That’s because it is a good chance to raise their status in the clergy. Someone who can hold on to their sense of self after having a god descend upon them might well bear a fraction of divine power...”

“Ah, I see. That means, they might have a chance to become gods?”

“That has been the case for some, but for the most part, it has not. It ultimately depends on the person themselves.”

“I see. And becoming a god doesn’t seem particularly advantageous either...”

Itami had no idea what benefits that state would grant, so he tilted his head in contemplation.

“That means there’s nothing good about it at all.”

If even Rory the demigoddess was grumbling about it, that suggested that there were more things he did not understand. However, she swiftly changed her attitude and continued:

“However, it is a priceless gift to people who live for their faith.”

“Hm, I see.”

On the other hand, Hardy did not seem to have found anyone satisfactory among the white goth priestesses, and a look of despair crossed her face. It looked as though she was sighing. Then, she looked beyond the priestesses with a look of resignation on her face, and then her expression suddenly lit up with delight.

As Rory turned to where Hardy was looking, she exclaimed in a panicked voice:

“Ah, wait!”

But Rory could not stop Hardy as she darted toward Lelei’s body.

Lelei sprawled on the ground, as though physically struck. A faint glow limned her.

“What... just happened...”

Rory’s hands covered her mouth, staring in shock as though she had just witnessed a truck accident involving a schoolgirl. The priestesses were also startled into silence.

Alfie patted her little sister’s face and shouted “Lelei, Lelei! Wake up! Open your eyes!”

Just then, Lelei sprang up, and it seemed as though her silver hair had descended to her waist. Then, she lightly touched her sister’s hand and smiled to put her at ease, before addressing the group:

“Guests who have travelled far to come here, I bid you welcome. My name is Hardy. Let us proceed.”

Hardy – who had stolen Lelei’s body – stepped up to Itami as though showing off to Rory, and took his hand.

“Wh-where?”

Being addressed with Lelei’s voice and her face made it feel as though Lelei was actually saying it. However, after remembering that the spirit of the goddess Hardy was within Lelei’s body, Itami decided to correct himself and said, “Wh-where will we be going?”

Hardy placed her index finger to her lip, tilting her head in thought.

Then she announced, “Mm~ to sate my hunger, of course.”

However, Itami’s watch said that it was three in the afternoon. It was too late for lunch but too early for dinner.

“A, a meal? But I’m not hungry...”

As she heard Itami’s denial, Hardy’s green eyes filled with a dangerous gleam and narrowed into slits, as though to say, If you don’t come with me, terrible things will happen.

Of course, even as Hardy displayed that terrifying side of her, she was still tugging on his arm with just a hint of force, and the way she looked up at him was quite charming.

This was a magnificent use of the carrot and the stick.

In that instant, an alarm bell went off inside Itami’s head.

Lelei would never have – or rather, she could not possibly have – shown him a seductive expression like the one on her face now. Though he was reluctant to admit it, Itami was slowly becoming aware that the girl before him was not the one he had gotten accustomed to and familiar with. In addition, he was firmly convinced that no girl would ever fall in love with him at first sight, a position which over 30 years of life had solidified into an unbreakable pillar. Thus, if a female continued approaching him despite these two factors, it was a sure sign of a scam, a honeytrap, or some black-hearted joke. Thus, Itami swiftly backed away from her.

“My, how cold. Do you not like this girl’s body?”

“That’s not it!”

Hardy advanced and pressed herself against Itami. After seizing his hand, she embraced it tightly with both arms.

“So you don’t mind, then?”

“Har-Hardy-sama? You’re, uh, making things hard for me....”

Itami tried to pull himself free, but Hardy was unwilling to let go and redoubled her grip on him.

“How mean. I was hoping you would call me Hardy, in a tone of respect and intimacy. Don’t you address Rory directly?”

“No, ah, well, about that... Hardy... sama?”

“Hardy.”

“...Hardy...san?”

“Ah well, that’s fine too. We’ll leave it at that for now.”

After that Hardy released her grip on Itami’s arm.

“Please follow me.”

Hardy led Itami, his group, and the white goth priestesses out of the shrine in a long train, to what seemed to be the most luxurious-looking restaurant in the town surrounding Belnago Shrine. She shouted for the boss, opened up a menu, and then proceeded to order everything on it from top to bottom, enough to fill up the entire table with food.

The quantity was such that even Itami and the others could not help but stare in stunned silence. Even the eight of them eating together would be hard-pressed to finish it all up. The cuisine was mainly heavily-flavored dishes of meat, vegetables, river fishes, mint, mushrooms, grains, cheese and cream. They gleamed with oil and fat, and they looked like they could cause indigestion just by looking at them. However, Hardy dug into the food, as though intent on finishing it all by herself.

The emptied plates piled up and up. The onlookers could not help but worry that she would hurt herself by eating so much.

“Well, uh, you might be able to finish it all, but perhaps you could, uh... show some restraint?”

While everyone around her was left dumbfounded by that prodigious appetite, Tuka gathered her courage and ventured a protest.

However, the goddess of the Underworld simply shrugged and replied, “Ah~ being a god isn’t easy, you know. Emotions fade away as one travels the endless river of time, and soon one stops being able to feel things. If that happens, I’ll become a being that only exists to carry out her

functions. To avoid that, I need to take my fill of enjoyment and excitement.”

“In other words, eating?”

“Exactly. You should know well, High Elf of the Elf races. How do you greet the end of your own millenia-long lifespan, High Elf? After losing your joy, your emotions, your passions, your interest in everything, you turn into a tree because you tire of life, do you not?”

“.....”

“Then, will you return Lelei to us after satisfying your hunger?”

That question came from Alfie, for whom this situation was like negotiating the terms for the release of a family member who had been kidnapped.

“Of course. However, I want to thoroughly enjoy myself first.”

Hardy licked her lips playfully as she said that.

“When you say ‘thoroughly’, you mean...”

“Of course, if I had a companion with whom I could share my joys and sorrows, I could return her to you right now... Rory, marry me. Or, I could marry you. Let us become one and grow old together.”

As expected of a god; it would seem even gender was not a barrier to her.

In addition, even her voracious consumption had not impacted her elegant air in the slightest. They could all feel her magnanimity and grace even through her casual conversation.

Of course, Rory was determined not to lose out. She nibbled a piece of toast in an adorable manner, and when she heard Hardy’s sudden statement, she turned her face away in refusal.

“No thanks, I already have someone.”

“By ‘someone’, you mean this gentleman here, don’t you?”

Hardy’s face and body suddenly pressed close to Itami, and in response, Itami scrabbled back.

“Don’t be a stranger. It’s hurtful.”

Rory moved, her frustration at its peak.

She suddenly rose to her feet and forced herself between Itami and Hardy, then rested the edge of her Halberd on Hardy’s slender neck.

“If you don’t watch yourself, I’ll get mad!”

“Ah~ what a rude girl. That’s some nerve you have, a demigoddess pointing a blade at a full goddess.”

“You may be a goddess, but that doesn’t mean I’ll bow and scrape mindlessly before you. I’ll repay kindness with kindness and rudeness with rudeness. This is an ample reward for someone who stole the body of a girl who wasn’t even one of your priestesses and making moves on someone else’s man.”

“That said, they were all weak-spirited girls. Why would I care about my priestesses if there’s a reliable girl who can take my spirit?”

(TL Note: the JP term is 霊格, referring to spiritual power)

“That’s pretty damn immortal, you know that?”

“Of course I do. I know it very well.”

“If you do, then get out of there at once!”

“I don’t want to. It’s been so long since I last took on a mortal form. Can’t I enjoy myself a little? Lend it to me for a while.”

“As if I’d lend her to someone like you. Youji and Lelei both belong to me.”

“Well, it’s jealousy then? How cute... as they say, all’s fair in love and war. I love the feeling of claiming a man that other women like. Immoral things like that excite me so much that I shudder.”

“There’s no joy in a loveless relationship!”

“That’s a prospective goddess of love for you. I guess nobody else will do. Love me, then.”

As Hardy said this, she reached a delicate fingertip out to caress Rory’s

cheek.

Rory pressed the edge of her halberd against Hardy's neck again, who backed away while saying, "Like I was saying, stop it..."

"Didn't I say I wasn't marrying you already? I responded to your invitation to make it plain to you!"

Having learned that intimidation was completely ineffective, Rory pouted and put up her halberd.

"Ah~ isn't that a shame. Still, I'm sure you'll come around some time. I'll wait for you until then. You, the Elf girl over there. How about it? Become my lover. You don't mind girls, do you?"

To Itami, that was a statement which could not be simply brushed off.

And indeed, Tuka did seem somewhat disturbed by it, but she did not attempt to hide her reaction. Instead, she composed herself and primly answered, "Please permit me to refuse, Hardy-sama."

"And why would that be?"

"I do not like you."

Hardy sighed, and then turned the thrust of her attack to Yao.

"How about you, Dark Elf?"

"You have no need to ask, do you? All you need to do is read my mind."

"...How mean. Even a god can only use physical senses while in a body of flesh. Please tell me what you are thinking."

"Then please permit me to refuse you as well. In the past, I might have readily acceded to your invitation. However, I no longer care for you at all. The reason for my visit today is to renounce my faith in you."

"Is that so? What a shame."

"Isn't that obvious enough? You turned my friends and tribesmen into the Flame Dragon's fodder! How could I not hate you for that?!"

Itami sensed Yao's emotions rising to a head. He placed a hand on her knee in warning and reminded her:

“Yao, calm down.”

“...Yes.”

Yao lowered her head and remained silent.

“Eh~ you’re quite obedient to this man. Oi. Then, order this Dark Elf girl to be my lover.”

“I am afraid I must refused Hardy sa–n. I do not intend to repeat the same thing over and over again, but there is a reason why Yao dislikes you.”

“Indeed, I know. However, I have no intention of regretting my actions, nor do I care about them.”

“What?! Why is that?!”

Yao sprang up as she shouted her reply, but Hardy merely shrugged in displeasure.

“Please don’t ask pointless questions. Would you be able to accept any answer I gave you? Even knowing the answer would not lessen your pain. Why? Why? Why?! ...Much like an interrogation, your questions are not intended to find an answer, but to induce guilt in someone else and hurt them. No matter how many answers I give or how many replies you’re given, it’s like drinking from the sea, which only makes one thirstier. So don’t cloak it in sophistry, but fiercely, earnestly, directly hate me. There’s no need to pretend that you actually want to know the reasons for it.”

“No need to pretend?! Are you saying my misery and pain are all fake?”

“Exactly. I know nothing of your pain and misery, nor do I want to know. After all, I did what I did with full knowledge of the consequences.”

“Too much! That’s too much!”

“What’s too much? Where have I gone too far? Consider what you are eating. You take the lives of animals and plants to feed yourselves. Is that not too much?”

“If we don’t do that, we will die. These are the rules of nature.”

“Then you should understand why the Flame Dragon hunts and eats, then.”

“But there was no need to use us as its feed.”

“The Flame Dragon decides what it eats. In addition, I did not put you all on a plate and serve you up to the Flame Dragon as a meal. Is that incorrect?”

“That... that might be so.”

“Still, I would not have minded doing that. One needs to kill other creatures to raise a carnivorous pet. This is a universal and natural course of action. You feed your dogs and eagles with meat; where does the meat come from?”

Indeed, the staff of an aquarium fed fish to orcas and dolphins. Those fish were painstakingly raised with others of their kind in another tank. It was easy to gloss over it, but it was a selfish and cruel scenario.

Humans instinctively placed themselves outside of the food chain, but perhaps a being which surpassed humanity would see that as a violation of natural law and scoff at it.

“The strong prey upon the weak. It is a rule of nature. Because of that, you too have the right to defend yourselves. Thus, I will not pursue the matter of you slaying my Flame Dragon. The plan may have gone awry, but that too was to be expected.”

“But!”

“And in any event, I am the mistress of the Underworld. All but a few souls will pass into my domain upon their demise. I will guarantee them happiness after death. Thus, the right to spare or slay is also mine to exercise. If one can exchange a moment of agony for the bliss of the afterlife, then it is hardly different from the pains of childbirth. It is merely a transition from one world to the next. Your parents, your friends, your fiancée, all of them are living happily in the world of the dead.”

Those words were apparently chosen to provoke Yao.

Unable to bear it any further, Yao drew her rapier and pointed it at Hardy's neck.

"Happily? You dare speak that word? Don't give me that nonsense! Happiness is earned through struggle, not given by others! Not even a god can give people happiness!" Yao shouted as her emotions raged out of control.

Itami hurriedly grabbed Yao's shoulders from behind, pleading with her to "Stop it, Yao."

"Itami-dono, please do not stop me. I, I..."

"I know why you feel that way, but you can't!"

Itami had a pretty good idea of why Yao was so angry.

After all, Hardy's exposition was pretty much the same as a dictatorship bragging about the happiness of his country's people under his party's rule.

If you asked each of the citizens about it, they would probably respond with something along the lines of "It is thanks to our Maximum Leader that we are living in happiness". However, that answer would sound very fake, because there was no scale on which happiness could be measured in the first place. Everybody's definition of happiness was different from each other. There was no way to simultaneously ensure the happiness of everybody at once.

It was precisely because of this that the best mankind could do in satisfying themselves was to not infringe on the rights of others. People had to respect each other when pursuing their own happiness, and the work of creating an environment which permitted such a thing to take place was called "social welfare".

While adequate food, housing, clothing and health were all preconditions for happiness, they were by no means the same as happiness. By using policy to create happiness, one would need to define the precise meaning of happiness, and then force everyone to conform to that standard.

It would be like trying to create a utopia by plastering the streets with slogans like “Aren’t we all happy together?” “Let’s be happy together?” “It would be strange to be unhappy” and “You need to examine yourself if you’re not happy”.

Simply put, it would be a sacrilege against the soul. How many people would not be angry when they learned their friends and family were being subjected to that sort of treatment?

Itami could sense the righteous anger from Yao’s wrath toward Hardy. Even so, it would not be fair to direct that rancor at Lelei’s body.

“You can’t. That body belongs to Lelei.”

“But—!”

“Dammit, didn’t I tell you to stop?! You too, Rory! Don’t just stand there and gawk, help hold Yao back!”

Rory and Tuka stared as they saw Itami — who hardly ever raised his voice — bellowing at Yao. Then, they gazed at Yao with meaningful looks in their eyes.

“...Yes.”

As she watched a deeply remorseful Yao quiet herself, Hardy sat down primly and touched the place on her neck where the tip of Yao’s sword had touched it. The crimson line of the wound healed shut in an instant.

“Hardy, don’t treat souls as dolls. Souls are not toys.”

“If you want to save them, then fight for them like a good little minion of Emroy.”

The animosity between Hardy and Rory was clearly apparent in that brief exchange of words. If this kept up, the mood in the air might become even more malevolent.

“Hardy-sama. Perhaps it is time you told us the reason for summoning us here?”

Itami decided to push to the main topic. The use of -sama was to emphasize the distance between them.”

“...All right. That might be better.”

Yao looked like she wanted to lunge at Hardy, who deliberately trembled and went “oooh, I’m sooooo scared”.

“Actually, there is a place I’d like you to visit. It’s the reason I called you here.”

“Visit? Us?”

“Yes. It concerns the future of this world. No, that’s not right. It also concerns you people from the other world.”

“And what would that be?”

Hardy shouted for the storekeep and ordered wine, which she drank after filling her glass.”

“Before I tell you about that, I need to mention something about the Gate.”

“Ah, that’s right. I have some things to ask you about the Gate.”

Rory drew close to Hardy, but the latter decided to answer Itami’s question first.

“Joining the two worlds was unexpectedly easy. One could say that a world is like the flow of a river that began with the creation of the universe. In the process of their chaotic flow toward the horizon of eternity, they meander and narrow through the influence of valleys and mountains. Sometimes, two worlds are close together, and very nearly merge. At that instant, a simple push can link two worlds. This is when a Gate opens. However, these flows will not always flow together. At some point, they might end up flowing toward their individual destinations. Do you understand so far?”

“Ah, I think I do...”

“The Gate at Arnus is where the two worlds are in contact. Originally, it was just a small hole, and it was very unstable due to the vibrations of worlds, so passing through it took quite a bit of effort. The magicians of the Empire created a magical device so as not to let it disappear. This is

much like anchoring a ship to a pier with a chain attached to a rock.

“I see, so that’s the door-like structure on Arnus Hill.

“Indeed. That magical structure joins the two worlds together. Thus, the Gate will not vanish.”

“And if the Gate does not vanish, will there be a problem?”

“The two worlds should have slowly drifted apart. If they are bound together by force, this will cause many logical errors. Many undesirable consequences will result on both worlds. The worlds will bend, twist and warp. No matter how hard one pulls on the oars or how wide one casts one’s sails, the ship will not sail. If one insists on sailing anyway, the body of the boat will start to creak – no, perhaps it has already started to creak – and fissures might even appear on the stones of the pier, no?”

Hardy smiled as she said this. To the listeners, it was as though she were telling them that this was deadly serious, and it sparked unease within them.

“So, so... what will happen?”

“Hm, well, first... ah, the earthquakes have already happened.”

Earthquakes. The very thought made Shandy and Gray – citizens of the Empire – hold their breath.

However, Itami was Japanese, and he was not unduly alarmed. After all, he had grown up in a country where he had been told “the big one will come in the next decade”.

Thus, Itami asked: “And then?”

Hardy did not answer Itami’s question right away. Instead, she raised her glass and downed it in one gulp, before cheerfully answering:

“You’ll need to see for yourselves, and then decide what you want to do next. That is why I called you here. Of course, you don’t have to go over right away. There’s some time, and you’re very busy. You can go over whenever you’re free. However, this isn’t something which can be delayed forever. I hope you understand that.”

Chapter 3



“What are you scheming?”

It was Rory’s turn to speak with Hardy after she was done with Itami.

“To make this world a more beautiful and wonderful place?”

“You could have just said you wanted to throw it into chaos.”

“That would not be inaccurate,” Hardy chuckled, like the sound of silver bells.

“On that note, the place where the worlds were joined doesn’t seem quite appropriate. Why did you make a hole there?”

“Pure coincidence, of course. Also, the culture and artefacts from the other side of the Gate have done a marvellous job of shaking up the stagnant, rotting Empire. Now that the Empire understands that there is a nation stronger than them out there, the Empire built by humans and for humans can no longer stand. From now on, all races will be able to raise

their heads and improve their lot in life. These are interesting times we live in.”

More like troubling times, Itami thought. Did all those people in Ginza die for that? However, Hardy did not care one jot about that sort of thing. Telling her would probably be a waste of time.

“If that was the reason for opening the Gate, then what are you doing now?”

“I want to witness humanity’s decision firsthand, and what they will do next.”

“Decision? Do next?”

“Indeed. In order to fulfil my duties as Queen of the Underworld, I must destroy the structure at Arnus. Does that not mean I must destroy the otherworld army that has conquered Arnus and guards the Gate? However, Giselle alone would probably not be enough for that. You won’t help me either, Rory. So I needed to increase my forces. That was why I awoke the Flame Dragon.”

Yao was stunned. The question which had been asked earlier was finally answered.

“Just, just for that? If you just wanted to shut the Gate, then could you not have just told us? We would exhaust ourselves to carry out your will. There would be no need for a Flame Dragon...”

“Ah, is that so? Would you really have understood?”

“Yes, all you had to do was find someone willing to listen and tell him.”

“Do you really believe what you’re saying? You’ve experienced it before, haven’t you? Pleading with all your heart and soul and receiving no help in return?”

After hearing that, Yao could not respond.

She had humbled herself and begged others to help her protect her tribe and defeat the Flame Dragon, but nobody was willing to aid her. Even Itami – who had set out to make a move – had not done so for her sake.

Then, Hardy glanced at the silent Yao and said, “Well, in any case, it’s your problem now. Since you interfered with my plans, you need to take responsibility for it.”

“Take responsibility... What do you want us to do?”

“Go see what happens when you leave the Gate alone, and then decide what you will do next. I will simply be watching from the side.”

She sounded like she was looking forward to something exciting. Itami could not help but put up his hand.

“Then, in that case, do we need to come back here and report to you?”

“No need for that. I will send Giselle with you, and you can deal with her. All you need to do is view it with your own eyes and then contemplate what actions you will take next.”

“But I can’t contemplate or anything. It’s not like I’m an expert.”

“Then bring someone knowledgeable along. It needs to be someone who can visualize the consequences...”

If the earthquakes were only the first of many bizarre phenomena that resulted from the existence of the Gate, then it was their duty to investigate. Still, he was hoping that Hardy would go into more detail. Should he bring a seismologist along, then?

“Your face suggests that you understand and that you do not understand. Did I get my point across?”

“Youji’s face has always been like that.”

“No, I’m having a bit of trouble digesting it with just that. It’s still a little hard to take in...”

Itami scratched his head as he said this.

“That’s fine. If that’s the case, I am willing to give you a little incentive for motivation.”

“An incentive?”

“Yes. You’ll understand if you personally benefit, no?”

“What sort of incentive are we talking about here?”

“I can’t entirely resolve the problem that has been troubling you so far, but I can take care of a large part of it. What do you think?”

“And what exactly is troubling us?”

“The problem that you’re griping about, of course.”

As Hardy said this, she cast the goblet in her hand.

It traced a neat curve and struck one of the curtains in the restaurant with a high-pitched sound. No, the source of that sound was the cup striking the head of someone hiding behind that curtain.

The man tore through the curtains and collapsed to the ground.

Gray and Shandy nervously approached the fallen man. Their conclusion – from his clothing and the dagger he held – was “He’s probably an assassin”. The realization of what that meant made them tremble. They had not announced their movements, and they had travelled to Belnago via the HMT, which was impossible to outpace. Yet how had the assassins found their way here.

“You mean you can’t help us finish them all off?”

Itami wondered if she could just directly get rid of all of them.

“Of course not. I can only take care of the ones who came to Belnago. I’ve given prophetic dreams to the ones who want to kill these girls, and so the anxious ones who don’t want others to get her first will come here. Of course, some of them have not responded. They will probably be the hardest to deal with. You’ll have to take care of them yourself. Think of it as a trial.”

“Prophetic dreams... so you were the one who called them here.”

Rory bared her teeth as she glared dangerously at Hardy. If Itami had flat-out denied Hardy’s request from the start, then she would simply have hinted to all the assassins that they were in Belnago. In other words, there was no room for them to refuse.

However, Itami held Rory back and thanked Hardy.

“Forget it. It’s still a load off our backs. Fleeing will be easier once there are fewer people hunting Lelei. It should be easier for her to attend the conference in Londel now.”

If Hardy could deal with most of the assassins, then investigating the oddities would not be a problem. In addition, she had told them that they could go when they were free. Since they would be gallivanting all over the countryside for their mission, they could simply head over when it was convenient to do so.

“Don’t scare me like that, did you honestly intend to continue running?”

“I plan to run until I can’t run any more... is that bad?”

As Hardy heard Itami’s answer, she looked at Rory with a look on her face that seemed to say you’d better think of something.

“I say, Rory. You’ve been following him all this while. Why didn’t you teach him that important fact of life?”

“There was no need to. He is Youji. That is enough.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Hardy muttered. Then, she wagged her index finger at Itami, like she was his teacher.

“Is that really a good thing? The more you try to run from your problems, the more they tend to catch up with you and wait at the place where you have to return. If you continue running in spite of that, you may end up losing the path behind and ahead of you.”

He might not like her, but this was still a divine revelation. Itami nodded.

“...Aye. That might be true. I’m painfully aware of that.”

“Which means you know that and you still intend to run?”

“Yes. I dislike pain and suffering, so I try to avoid it as much as possible.”

“Someone like that beat the Flame Dragon?” Following that outburst Hardy open-mouthedly stared at him, her hands on her cheek.

“When Youji decides to get serious, pursuing him is quite the task.”

“Is, is that so... he seems a lot different from how Giselle described him.”

“Ah, what did she tell you about me?” Itami nervously asked. He was quite worried about what sort of rumors were spreading around him.

“She said you were a battle maniac who insisted on fighting any foe he encountered, and that you possessed frightening power that could desolate an area of 50 yuns in a single blow.

(TL Note: ヌ is yun and seems to be a unit of measure)

The demigod Giselle seemed to have exaggerated Itami’s abilities quite greatly. While some people inflated their opponents’ strength to excuse their loss, she seemed to have gone too far.

“That’s totally off.”

“That’s right, it’s completely the opposite. Youji’s the kind of man who’ll run if he gets the chance.”

As he heard Rory needling him, Itami replied, “Leave me alone, besides, I’m a coward.”

“That’s fine. Youji, you may say that you’re afraid, but when push comes to shove and you have to defend something important to you, you’ll rise to the challenge. We’ve all seen that. I hope to see more in future.”

Yao and Tuka nodded as Rory said this.

“But...”

Then, Hardy spoke up.

“You cannot run from the trial which awaits you. Your enemy has drawn up battle lines and awaits you. It is time for you to stand firm and choose. Will you let this girl present her thesis at the conference?”

As Hardy said that, she put her hand on her... on Lelei’s chest.

“...If, just if... we didn’t go for the conference and just fled right away, what would happen?”

“Do you still not understand? Your enemies will not back down. If you run, you’ll probably run back to Arnus, where you live. In the end, the

people important to you will be involved in this, and many more people will have to die. That's how it is."

"As I thought, huh?"

Itami clicked his tongue, his brow a mess of wrinkles.

In the darkened interior of the Chinook, Lelei studied Hardy's hair by what little light could enter through the small window.

Strictly speaking, it was also Lelei's hair.

After being possessed by Hardy, her hair had grown out until she could sit on it. She had tied it into a braid and then cut it off below her neck. The density of the weaving had shortened it somewhat, but the braid was still around the length of Lelei's arm. It was the same familiar platinum blonde, but it seemed have retained part of Hardy's divinity, and it glowed like a translucent gemstone.

"Since you are not a priestess, but have offered your body to a god, I shall reward you with the right to use divine magic, using this as a catalyst. However, once you do so, the magic in question will be fixed and you will not be able to use any other kinds of divine magic, so you must choose carefully. Also, I ate a li~ttle too much because I haven't eaten in so long. You might be worried about losing weight afterwards, sorry about that. I thought of moving the fat to certain parts of your body, but that might change your body to the type that man doesn't like, so I did not do so. I'm pretty wise, right?"

And with that, Hardy departed Lelei's body.

"When the priestesses of Belnago saw this hair, you could see their desire to possess it written all over their faces."

From the priestesses' point of view, the hair Lelei had grown out was essentially part of their goddess' body. It was a sacred relic which should have been placed in a holy sanctuary. However, it was a gift from Hardy, so they could not just steal it from Lelei. All they could do was suggest that she should "make herself look a little better". This resulted in Lelei's

somewhat unsightly haircut, as though it had been hacked off with a knife. Then, they tried to gather up the leftover strands which remained.

It would seem that the priestesses intended to weave the strands into a holy tapestry and place it within a reliquary.

After this, events proceeded as described.

After leaving the Belnago Shrine, Lelei returned to Londel under the protection of Itami and the others, to present herself to the conference.

Most of the assassins targeting Lelei had been drawn to Belnago like moths to a flame and captured by the shrine's warrior monks. However, the Piper – never one to sully his own hands – could not be dealt with. Shandy had fallen for his scheme and made a big disturbance at the conference hall. In order to get him off their backs, they entered the Imperial Capital and discussed matters with Zorzal to resolve things.

Still, there was the matter of the agreement with Hardy.

They had to go to Kunapnui in order to fulfil their promise. Lelei felt quite depressed at having to inconvenience everyone for this.

“Don't worry about it. We gave everyone a lot of trouble too, didn't we?”

Tuka urged Lelei not to worry about it. According to her, the back and forth of “loans” and “exchanges” were a natural expression of interpersonal relationships. Avoiding troublesome things like that might be a relief, but they were also signs of a sickness called “loneliness”, which would plague one until death.

“I like you too, Lelei. So go ahead and share the things which bother you with me. Maybe if we can share our worries with each other, we can help each other deal with them.”

Rory nodded. She was seated on the other side of Lelei, sandwiching her between them.

“...Thank you.”

Lelei nodded as she quietly replied.

“We’re about to take off. Everyone, please strap in.”

Itami’s call was the signal for Kurata and the others to squeeze into the cramped interior – packed with cargo – and take any empty jump seats.

Itami was the last to enter the helicopter.

“Arunusu tower, Juliet Golf 5044, request IFR clearance.”

(TL Note: This part is in English)

Fragments of chatter between the pilots and Arnus Control Tower filtered out from the cockpit. Just as they were musing about the conversation that had ended up as shouting at each other, there was a loud noise, followed by the sound of a fierce impact. Itami stepped up to see what was going on, and saw the copilot grabbing his head.

“Ah, crap...”

The copilot was mumbling to himself, and the captain seemed to be looking down on him with pity.

“What, what happened?”

In response to Itami’s question, the captain muttered “How shall I put this...”

“Well, this guy said that Control’s English pronunciation was a little weird, so Control said Japanese was okay.”

“Control to JG5044. Cleared to Kunapnui. Ready to copy?”

As though to validate the captain’s words, one could hear Japanese through the incomprehensible English babble coming from the speakers.

“Ready to copy. Go ahead.”

“Oh, isn’t that Lelei-chan? Your Japanese is as good as always. Can you keep up with our English? I’ll feed you the data.”

Lelei recorded the control tower’s English weather data in fluent Japanese. It made the others feel sorry for themselves and that they were imposing on her.

“Don’t feel bad. It’s best not to worry about her. The truth is, she’s so

smart it feels like she's cheating, and she makes everyone else seem stupid in comparison. The right thing to do is hand off troublesome things to others. As the saying goes, it's better for a stupid man to sleep than think. There's no point in agonizing over things. It's better to change your thinking."

Itami had said this to encourage the other man. However, the copilot took it as a trampling of his pride, and his head drooped even lower as he moaned "Gueeeehh..."

"You're not helping, Itami! Stop rubbing salt into his wounds."

"Ah, sorry. It just slipped out..."

However, what Captain Tsuchiura saw was Lelei's eyes, staring hungrily at the copilot from behind Itami.

"If you don't feel up to it, I can take your place."

Tsuchiura had half a mind to take her up on her offer when he saw the state of his copilot, but if he did that, his fellow airman's pride might never recover.

"Ah... no need for that. It's fine."

Lelei's words perked the copilot's head up, and he hurriedly rushed to complete the flight preparations. In all likelihood, he must have felt that he could not keep wallowing in depression. It was less that he had pulled himself together but that someone had lit a fire under his ass.

Forget it, Itami thought. It would be fine as long as he could fly.

As he glanced back into the cargo hold, he saw that the window seats had been taken by Rory, Piña and the other aviation virgins. The other members of the team fit themselves in the spaces between them.

The professors were having a heated debate about the distortion in the world that Itami had described in his report; specifically, what form it would take. Perhaps that was why there were empty seats beside them, and Itami took one of them.

"According to the report, it appears there is some sort of astronomical

displacement going on.”

In response to Youmei, Shirai said:

“Actually, questions about changes in stellar topography have come up in Japan.”

“What did you say? Why did nobody mention this in public?”

Youmei and Urushibata asked that question in the same voice.

“That’s because our astronomers are still verifying the matter. They feel the deviation is a matter of mechanical error. After all, this sort of thing would normally be unthinkable. How could the positions of stars and galaxies shift in such a short time? Actually speaking these doubts out loud would call one’s own abilities and vision into question. However, if it were to slip out at a drinking party... well, it would spread like wildfire.”

“Is that so. That would mean the same phenomena have appeared on both sides of the Gate.”

“U~mu,” Youmei grunted, stroking his beard with his fingers.

“In truth, I reasoned that the Gate must be the cause as soon as I read the report.”

“Then what about the earthquakes?”

“Well, there are earthquakes in Japan every day, including the ones we can’t feel.”

“Well, we can’t regard an increase in earthquakes as statistically significant... can we?”

As the engine’s output increased, the incredible roaring of the engines filled the Chinook’s interior.

The helicopter took off, filling everyone with the sensation of floating. The virgin team plastered their faces to the tiny windows of the cabin, entranced by the sight of the ground receding beneath them.

“Uwah, uwah, uwah~!”

Hamilton clung to Piña as the helicopter shuddered in the wind.

However, Piña seemed quite nervous too, and her expression was ghastly. She kept silent, as though her right to shriek had been taken away by Hamilton.

“What a shameful display!”

As Youmei snorted in anger, Professor Urushibata tried his best to smooth things over.

“Give them a break, Professor Youmei. After all, this is their first time on an aircraft.”

“Granted, it is only expected for primitives to be astounded when exposed to the trappings of civilization. But we are not tourists. Why must we bring these girls with us on a scientific expedition? What is the JSDF thinking?”

“Don’t get the wrong impression, they’re apparently important figures in the Imperial government. Our destination is Imperial territory, so you might compare them to travel passes.”

“Oh... Well, it can’t be helped, then.”

The cameraman filmed Piña and the others, who were staring intently out of the windows.

“Is that red-headed girl really a princess of the Empire?” Kuribayashi’s little sister asked Kurokawa.

“Yes, that’s correct,” came the reply.

“The Empire is the enemy which attacked Ginza, am I right? Why are we treating them so kindly? Why haven’t we taken them as prisoners?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Can you tell me a little about these complicated matters?”

As she saw the younger Kuribayashi waiting with her notebook out, Kurokawa realised that she was trapped.

The clouds were like a white veil, and the Chinook ascended through them.

There was hardly any time to enjoy the sprawling view of Arnus beneath them, as the view outside the windows was soon little more than a sea of white. Droplets of what seemed like rain splashed against the window.

However, the droplets stopped splashing within moments. Right after that, the mighty rays of the sun flooded the darkened interior of the Chinook.

Piña and the others exclaimed “Uwah!” as they beheld the dream-like view before them.

“This, this is what Heaven looks like, your Highness.”

“Do the gods live in such a marvelous world?”

Rory sighed as she heard their conversation. “It’s nothing like that at all...”

It would seem she had been to Heaven before.

“Itami-dono. I wish to try walking upon that fluffy surface! Please allow me to dismount!”

“I want to go too!”

Piña and Hamilton pleaded as one. In particular, there was no trace of fear in Hamilton, who had been bleating in terror just now.

However, Itami shook his head. “Haaa~ It can’t be done.”

“Why?! Can’t you think of something, Itami-dono?”

“Those are clouds. They’re like fog. If I put you on them, you’ll pass through them and then fall until you hit the ground. It’s veeeeerrrry scaaaary~ It’ll hurt so much when you hit the ground. Just thinking about how all your bones will be crushed to powder frightens me.”

Hamilton clutched her ears shut and trembled, as though imagining what Itami had just described, and Piña froze as she felt a chill down her spine.

Still, she insisted: “How, how will you know if you don’t try?”

It would seem she imagined that it was like walking on freshly-fallen

snow.

“Ahhh... if you do that, you’ll die. You’ll die for sure.”

“Really? Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying. If you don’t believe me, you can give it a go if you want. Still, do it when I’m not looking. I don’t want to watch a suicide take place before my eyes.”

“Gggk. Does that mean the residents of the celestial realm do not want us mortals around?”

Piña and Hamilton grit their teeth and clenched their fists. Such was their sorrow that even the onlookers could not help but share their depression.

The professors glared at Itami, as though their eyes were saying, “What did you do to them, you fiend?”

Kurokawa exchanged malicious whispers with Kurata; something like “Hey, Kurata, did you hear that? The el-tee did something terrible to Piña-denkadono. I think he deceived her or something.”

“I think it was something like jump down into the world of the gods, like he was telling her to go kill herself.”

“How is that my fault?” Itami said as he pointed to himself.

“It’s not?”

Rory feigned ignorance.

“Cheh... Fine, fine. If you’re so dead set on it, how about skydiving? We can’t do it today, but we can arrange it when we next go to Japan.”

“You... what did you say? Sky... die... ving?”

Piña blinked.

“Yup. There’s a thing called a parachute; it can slow your speed of falling so you don’t get hurt. Solo jumping needs a certain degree of training, but if it’s just for entertainment, you can jump with an instructor holding you from behind... although it won’t be cheap.”

“Let’s do it, let’s do it!”

Piña and Hamilton’s faces changed. Perhaps one might describe this behavior as manic-depressive.

“Itami-dono, I would be delighted to walk the sky!”

“Oi... is it just Piña and her?”

Rory and Tuka looked unhappy. Lelei was quite restrained, but she still made a noise of displeasure.

“Fine, fine. You can come too.”

“Yaaay~!”

Was falling from the sky really that enjoyable? Itami thought. He was a man who did not take pleasure in throwing himself out of a perfectly good aircraft, so he looked upon the girl’s simple joy like he had found a surprising lifeform.

They must be feeling happy because they were looking out at the sky from the window.

Things would probably be different without that infinitesimal barrier between them and the sky.

They would be directly exposed to the limitless abyss before them, and their moods would change instantly. The wind would rush across their bodies and the earth would loom far beneath them. Their smiles would probably freeze up and their faces would twitch in fear.

Itami smiled evilly as that thought came to mind. However, that made him recall his own fear-filled experiences, so in the end he could not smile.

The Chinook skimmed over the ocean of clouds, like a boat sailing over a ripple-less lake.

They slowly descended as they drew near Kunapnui. Soon, they sank into the clouds, as though falling into a hole beneath them.

Depression spread through the passengers as the movie-like scene of fluffy white clouds floating by was suddenly interrupted.

“The window’s gone white again,” Piña said. Itami replied:

“Yes, we’re descending. The weather outside doesn’t look good.”

In fact, mist-like water droplets were condensing on the windows.

The helicopter lurched up and down and side to side. It was unstable, and visibility was poor.

The members of 3rd Recon understood that a sudden change of air pressure caused by a sudden descent might cause their ears to pop. They had prepared themselves for this by adjusting the pressure in their membranes. However, given that there was no ear popping, they realized that their descent was actually quite slow.

“They’re taking a lot of care in setting us down.”

“Well, there’s a lot of people aboard who are new to flying, so it’s probably a consideration for them.”

The conversation between Kurokawa, Kurata and the others went along those lines, but that was not the case.

This was not familiar airspace, but territory they were visiting for the first time. The prospect of descending through the clouds in such a place filled the airmen with dread.

Even in Japanese airspace, there had been cases where rescue helicopters had crashed into mountain peaks under poor visibility conditions. Moving through the clouds robbed them of their sense of balance, which resulted in the pilots not knowing how to properly orient their craft.

“Settling with power.”

“All we can do is believe in the map and what they say about there being no high peaks around here.

If Itami knew that the two pilots were gritting their teeth and paying careful attention to the controls in case the ground suddenly leapt out at

them, he might feel that jumping out with a parachute might be a better option.

In fact, once they broke through the cloud cover, a steep slope resembling the sides of the American Grand Canyon appeared before them. Though they were a good distance away and perfectly safe, the sheer size of the geographical feature deceived their senses, and the pilot hurriedly pulled up on the joystick.

“Ah!

As the helicopter shuddered, the passengers clung tightly on so as to not be thrown from their jump seats.

As they looked out the windows, they saw fog and rain lashing the steep slopes beneath them.

“What – what’s that?” the cameraman muttered as he placed his lens to the window. The rain and fog floating within the valley was not the white color they were familiar with.

Instead, it was black, resembling a cloud of ink poured into clear water. its surface was a flat plane, like a pool of still water. The black mist filled the valley and covered the land, and scattered peaks poked from the obsidian sea.

“I hope it’s not a poisonous gas.”

“Aye,” the professors said to each other with bitter expressions on their faces.

The airmen seemed to feel the same way, because they avoided touching the fog, choosing instead to hover at an altitude.

They abandoned their original plan to land within the valley, and began looking for a place to set down.

“What’s wrong?”

The pilot answered Itami’s query into the cockpit with a change of plans.

“Lieutenant Itami, I’m sorry to deviate from the plan, but we can’t land here. We need to pick a spot somewhat further away.

“I’ll leave it to you then, Captain.”

“Oh... frankly speaking, that helps a lot.”

One could describe the personality of JGSDF members as “thorough and stubborn”. They disliked changing their plans, and thus their pilots and operators were trained to accommodate that quirk of theirs. However, Itami was more casual in many ways, so he did not sweat the small stuff. He decided to leave the selection of the touchdown location to the pilots.

“Tsuchiura-san, how about that peak over there which looks like a mountain? Let’s land there.”

“Not in that area. The instruments aren’t reliable.”

“The instruments?”

“Maybe it’s the magnetic field in the area or something, but there’s a difference between what I see and what the instruments are telling me.”

The pilot’s instincts – honed through long years of flight experience – told him something other than what the values on his instruments said. In the face of this unprecedented occurrence, he decided to avoid setting down over there.

Incidentally, the pilot was a Captain, equivalent to Itami’s superior. However, Itami was in overall command of the operation. The reason for this was similar to the extreme example of why military medical officers, despite their high rank, could not command troops.

The pilot found a shelf-like region some distance from the black fog, and landed the Chinook there.

“Onee-sama, we’ve been waiting quite a while for you.”

There were no signs of habitation from the air, so everyone thought that this place was uninhabited. Yet, a voice greeted Itami and the others as they came down the helicopter’s ramp.

They squinted, and saw a draconic woman with bat-like wings hovering above them, her grey hair soaked by the rain.

She looked to be around 20 years old. Her deep blue skin was covered in tribal tattoos. She wore a sleeveless white goth priestess' outfit, and her gold-pupiled eyes seemed filled with depression as she looked at them.

Itami and the rest of 3rd Recon immediately brought their rifles up as they saw her. This was because that woman was accompanied by countless Wyverns. They covered the sky, baring their sharp teeth and fangs.

"Who is that? Do you know her?" Pina asked.

"Please don't stand behind me, it's very dangerous," Yao said, a LAM on her shoulder. Then, she proceeded to give a summary response.

"That is Her Eminence Giselle, the Apostle of Hardy, Queen of the Underworld."



“What, that person is...”

Giselle landed, holding a massive scythe like that used by the Grim Reaper. She looked around herself, like a punk looking for victims among the crowd. Then she jumped as she realised Itami was there, before slowly backing off.

“I-I suffered greatly in the past because of you. But, but today, this, this will be your end...”

“I’m leaving.”

However, Rory simply turned and left. Giselle’s tone suddenly changed to one of begging, and she hugged Rory from behind while saying, “Ah, please wait, Onee-sama!”

“That’s why you’d better fix that attitude of yours. I’ve been thinking that it doesn’t match someone who claims to be a priest. Belnago’s rules might be relaxed, but surely they’re not that relaxed. Are they?”

Giselle’s blue skin broke out in a sweat.

She had tried speaking in a proper tone in the past, but after being infected by Hardy’s way of speech, her tongue tied up in knots every time she tried to sound formal. Asking her to switch back was too much.

Her mouth opened as she attempted to say something, but the words would not come. A pitiful expression bloomed on Giselle’s face, as though she had forgotten how to speak.

“.....”

Rory patted the teary-eyed Giselle on the back.

“I get it, I get it. As long as I can see you’re trying.”

Giselle hurriedly bowed to her.

However, after feeling everyone looking sympathetically at her, she snapped, “What are you lot looking at?”

The subtext of that was “How dare you people look down on me?”

“Gi~se~lle? What was I just saying?”

“Ye~yes... I’ll behave myself.”

The demigoddess forced herself to curb her unruly tongue and with great effort, squeezed those words out in a polite tone.

After seeing all this, Itami and the others felt that there was no point keeping their heavy weapons at the ready, so they lowered their weapons

without being commanded to do so.

Even the nearby Wyverns scratched at their heads, almost as though to say “Good grief.”

“So, is that the anomaly you wanted to show us?”

“Ah, er, yes. If you want to observe it more closely, you’ll need to go down the mountain... so please ride these, onee-sama.”

Giselle whistled over several Wyverns and bade them carry Rory and the others.

“We, we’re going to ride these?”

Giselle frowned as she heard Professor Youmei’s panicked voice.

“He’s a nervous wreck... ah, no! Ah... well, they understand, and they won’t let you fall, so please do not worry and mount up. Ah, also, each one can only take two people.”

After Rory glared at her, Giselle’s fumblings were quite comical.

Rory, Lelei, Tuka and Yao immediately set about playing rock-paper-scissors.

“Jan-ken-pon!”

After three consecutive draws, victory was decided in the fourth round. Having shown scissors and won, Yao triumphantly pumped her fist in the air while going “Woohoo!”.

“Kuh,” the other three went in unison.

And so, the Wyvern assignments were Rory and Tuka, Lelei and Youmei, Urushibata and Shirai, the younger Kuribayashi and her cameraman, Piña and Hamilton, and Itami and Yao.

Kuwabara and the others remained with the Chinook at their landing zone. Their job was to pitch camp and stand sentry.

“I didn’t expect I would win. Looks like my luck’s taken a turn for the better.”

Yao squeezed Itami's hand. However, Itami looked back at her with a regretful expression.

"Yao, sorry to bother you, but the truth is I can't handle this sort of thing. I'll leave the reins to you."

"Eh? You're a man in green, who slew a Flame Dragon, and you're cowering before something like a Wyvern?"

However, that did not sound like a joke at all. Itami's pale face was deadly serious.

"I'm only saying this because it's you, but... but I'm really scared of heights."

"Eh?! But you were fine on the helicopter, weren't you?"

"Well, it was all right in there. Even if there was an accident, I'd have something to hold on to. But look at that."

Squatting before them was a lifeform with savage eyes and sharp teeth. It made one think, "Is that some kind of giant alligator?" Perhaps touching or maybe even sitting on it would have been fine, but he would obviously be afraid to entrust his body to it and take to the skies. In addition, he did not know how to ride one. Muttering all this and more, Itami swallowed his pride and asked Yao for help.

"First things first, you have to keep this a secret. I'm only telling you because it's you, Yao."

Is it really okay if I take the reins? Yao wondered, distinctly ill at ease.

Yao felt that it would be very dangerous as she thought back on her bad luck.

However, Itami had already revealed his fear of heights, and he had gone pale when looking at the Wyvern. Forcing him to control it would be too much. I have to help Itami no matter the cost, Yao thought.

"It's okay. My luck's been getting better of late, and bad things haven't been happening. I won the rock-paper-scissors just now, right? Her Holiness gave me that talisman too. It'll be fine, it'll be fine."

Yao clutched her 5-yen coin as she cheered herself up, then mounted the Wyvern.

“Come, Youji-dono. We’re setting out immediately,” she said as she smacked her waist.

Itami nervously climbed up the Wyvern’s back.

“Please hold on to me so you don’t fall off.”

“Is, is this alright?”

“Tighter. Until you can’t let go!”

Itami did as Yao said, wrapping his arms around her slender waist and plastering himself to her seductive back.

As Tuka saw this, she glared at her right hand and grumbled, “Why did I make paper, dammit?”

“Kuh, I’m so jealous,” Rory said, staring at Yao like a vengeful spirit.

Lelei’s eyes were fixed on her hand.

Youmei asked, “Miss, is there something wrong with your hand?”

“I miscalculated,” Lelei answered.

How had it turned out like this?

“I should have won on the fifth round.”

Lelei claimed.

“You-Youji-dono, I can feel your breath on my back...”

Her body-hugging leather armor transmitted the heat from Itami’s breath directly to her body. With that heart-racing sensation behind her, Yao could not help but lean backwards.

“Ah...”

However, Itami was beyond caring, clinging as he was to Yao. Since there were no safety belts here or parachutes, all he could do was entrust his body to Yao.

“I’m so glad that I ended up with you, Yao.”

“Eh? Why’s that?”

“I can’t hug Rory, Lelei or Tuka like this, can I?”

Itami’s words referred to their frames. The other three were shorter than Itami, so it would not be less of hugging them from behind but putting his arms around their necks. Thus, Itami had to find someone around his size. In that respect, the tall Yao was ideal.

However, Yao did not interpret Itami’s words that way. To Yao, it sounded as though Itami was saying that he was embracing her precisely because it was Yao.

“Ah, so, so you mean, it’s okay because it’s me?”

An elated Yao straightened her back up as she puffed up with courage.

“I understand. Please leave it to me,” she said as she gripped the Wyvern’s reins. Her luck had been bad all this while, so she had been quite reserved. Now, Yao displayed the cool confidence that only she possessed at this time. She lightly kicked at the Wyvern to get it standing.

“Ohhh, uwawawah!”

Itami could not hold back his shrieking. After all, the sight of looking down those sheer cliffs would strike fear even into those with stable footing. That fear was multiplied tenfold when one was on the shifting back of a beast.

Yao looked back to Itami, reassuring him.

“It’s fine, Youji-dono. Please do not let go of me. I’ll be fine, so please enjoy my breasts as much as you like. It’s embarrassing to be groped in public, but I have no objections if you wish to take advantage of me during the confusion.”

“Don’t say that! It’ll sound terrible if it gets out! Do I look like I have the time for such things now?! Just fly it safely” Itami shouted as he squeezed his eyes shut.

And so, after their preparations were ready, the Wyverns spread their wings, like planes preparing to take off from an aircraft carrier.

“We’ll have dinner waiting for you when you get back.”

Kurata waved “Bye~bye~” to them as they left, like an air marshal.

“Then, we’ll be setting out. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

After verifying that everyone else was ready, Giselle spread her own wings.

Then, she stepped off the edge of the cliff, like a glider. The Wyverns followed behind her, gaining speed from their sudden plunge.

Unlike aircraft, riding on the backs of animals had a unique instability. As he felt his organs push up into his body from the fall, Itami screamed once more, and clung to Yao with all his might.

“Huhu! What ever will I do with you?” Yao smirked. However, in that moment, Tuka and Rory (who were flying ahead of them) transfixed Yao with their gazes. The two of them seemed to be muttering some terrible imprecations, and a chill ran down Yao’s spine.

In truth, Tuka was going, “Calm down, right hand, calm down!” while clenching her fist, and Rory was incanting a prayer along the lines of, “My Lord Emroy, please forgive her sins. That woman knows not what she does”.

The two of them looked like they were cursing her. Of course, that was not the case, but it seemed that way to Yao. It caused Yao’s rapidly-soaring confidence to shrivel up, and the uneasiness that had been eclipsed by being chosen by Itami reared its ugly head.

“Ahhh, my hand’s moving by... the wind!”

Worse, the vile aura around the blonde Elf’s right hand emitted an elemental spell, slicing the string which held the protective talisman (the 5 yen coin) that hung before Yao’s chest.

The 5 yen coin looked like it was about to fall off. Yao saw this and shrieked: “Ahhh! Why’s this happening?!”

In that moment, Yao let go of the reins and lunged for the 5-yen coin, throwing herself off the Wyvern’s back.

“Look out, Yao!”

Itami was holding tightly onto Yao and was carried along by her. However, Itami grabbed at the Wyvern’s body with his legs and barely managed to stay seated.

However, Yao seemed to view Itami’s lifesaving hands as a nuisance, and tried to shrug him off.

“Youji-dono, let go of me!”

“Idiot! If I do that you’ll die! Grab the reins!”

“I can’t! Without that, their curses will—”

“Stop struggling, you dummy! You’re sliding off, if that keeps up you’ll fall!”

Itami was trying to hold onto Yao, while the latter was freaking out, and so her body slowly slid down. He attempted to keep her in place by embracing her slender waist, but Yao kicked and thrashed wildly, twisting in his grip, until she was face to face with Itami.

However, that meant Itami’s face was buried in her ample cleavage.

“I, I can’t breathe...”

Yao’s thrashing was compounded by his breathing difficulty. Her waist felt like it was going to slip from Itami’s arms. While he managed to hang on with his thighs, the fearsome view below his head and the fear that Yao might slip from his grasp at any moment only made him scream: “Ahhhh! The reins! Grab the reins! Hurry!”

The Wyvern’s reins hung within Yao’s reach.

However, Yao was frozen from losing her 5 yen coin. It would seem she had not realized the gravity of her current situation.

“No way, no way, no way. Bad things will happen without that talisman! I’ll slip! I’ll fall! I’ll lose my purse! I’ll have bad luck!”

“Idiot! I’m the unlucky one now!”

The Wyverns flew by their own will, ignoring the fact that their

passengers were not holding onto the reins. They soared through the air high above the slopes, and then down into the deep valleys between the steep cliffs.

After about 30 minutes, they reached a large clearing.

If the black mist was a lake, then the Wyverns had landed on the lakeside. Everyone had dismounted safely, but Yao and Itami were in a pile to the side, unable to stand. Itami was thoroughly exhausted and panting heavily. However, nobody paid them any heed.

“This is it, Onee-sama.”

Professors Youmei, Urushibata and Shirai, as well as Kuribayashi Nanami, were speechless as they beheld what was before them. The cameraman set up his camera and began filming the tragic sight before them.

“This, this is...”

This was the scene occluded by the black fog. They could see it from the sky, but at such close range, they understood the severity of the situation.

After dismounting from her Wyvern, Tuka had gone to one knee, staying clear of the fog – well, it was less of a fog than mist or smoke – while she examined the plants. Then, she gave a mournful cry.

“It’s terrible...”

“What happened?”

“They’re all dead. Every living thing here is no longer alive...”

All the plants whose roots had been covered by the black fog had withered away while still appearing green.

If their leaves had turned red and fallen off, it would have been explainable as a natural process. However, the leaves were still green even as they had fallen off. This was an extremely abnormal sight.

The black mist spread like ink. Tuka found the corpse of an insect on the

other side of the fog, and picked it up with a pair of twigs, as though she were using chopsticks. The insect's body looked fresh, as though it had just died. It was still moist, even.

“Did it just die? Or is it that the bugs and the plants which die in this black fog do not rot away?”

In other words, even the micro-organisms responsible for decomposition had died.

Youmei, Urushibata and Shirai, who possessed knowledge of modern science, studied what Tuka was holding up. “Radiation?” “No, maybe it's a gas,” they said as they hypothesised the cause of death.

As he heard those dangerous words, Itami hurriedly withdrew his Geiger counter from his NBC protection gear pouch.

He pointed the device everywhere, and read out the values. “All normal,” he said. Then, he took out a gas detector, and poked its head into the black fog to test for toxicity. However, when he compared the change in the detector's color to a chemical defense field guide, there was no proof that there was any toxic gas in the air at all.

Giselle pointed to a stone peak protruding from the sea of clouds and said:

“I came here a month ago on Mistress' orders... At that time, the fog only extended up to there. But now it's all the way here.”

“Could, could this be the Apocryph?” Rory muttered.

(TL Note: JP term is アポクリフ, as in the apocrypha)

“Apocryph?”

“Tens, hundreds of thousands, perhaps even hundreds of millions of years later, the gods will leave and humans will vanish from this world. At that point the fog of the void will swallow the world and return it to primal chaos. That fog is called the Apocryph.”

“But aren't you and the gods still around, Rory?”

“Indeed. This is why this sort of thing should not have appeared yet. It

should be far, far in the future.”

As Rory said this, she fell to her knees, as though she had been dealt a heavy blow.

“Urushibata-kun, what do you make of this?”

“At a glance, it looks like some kind of smoke...”

Urushibata advanced down the slope and reached out to the surface of the black fog, but Giselle stopped him.

“Careful. If your hand goes in too deep, you’ll lose your fingers.”

As she said that, Giselle plucked a leafy branch from a tree that was not dead yet, then thrust it into the fog and waggled it around. Then she withdrew it and showed it to Urushibata.

The green leaves at the tip of the branch crumbled into powder at the merest touch, as though they had been thrust into liquid nitrogen.

Youmei plucked several leaves and inserted their tips into the mist.

If it were some kind of vapor or fog, then there should be some sort of ripple if he stirred it up. But the black mist remained still, like a shadow. It stayed in place and did not move.

“Visibility extends about four to five centimeters beneath the surface.”

Urushibata produced a convenience store’s plastic bag. He took out the food and drinks from the bag, emptying it. Then, he knelt down and tried to scoop up the black fog.

However, no matter how many times he tried, the black substance did not stay within the plastic bag, even when the black smoke had entered the bag.

“Umu. This is neither a gas or a liquid. In fact, it cannot even be considered matter.”

“Indeed,” Shirai and Urushibata said as they heard Youmei’s words.

The three wise men cupped their chins, observing the black fog like children gazing into a pond. The black fog filled the bag once they put the

bag in. But when they took it out again, the fog did not stay behind, leaving nothing in the bag.

“Could this be something like a shadow?”

“A shadow?”

A microphone suddenly extended over. Nanami stood beside it, a smile on her face as she awaited Youmei’s explanation. The camera hovered beside her.

As they saw her face, the scholars nodded and began their explanation.

“We cannot be sure yet, but I believe this might be some kind of extra-dimensional shadow.”

“Di-dimensional? Sounds like SF stuff...”

“Umu. It most likely sounds like pseudoscience to you. I too felt that way. But that fact is that this is a perfectly legitimate branch of science. They have used the Large Hadron Collider in Geneva to prove the existence of the fifth dimension.”

“Ha, is that so... but still, can something which looks so fluffy and has thickness like this be considered a shadow?”

“Umu. That is a good question. To we who live in the third-dimension, shadows are flat surfaces to us; in other words, they are two-dimensional.”

“Yes, yes.”

“However, since this appears to be a substantial – in other words, three-dimensional shadow – that alludes to the existence of a extra-dimensional entity of some sort.”

“H~m...”

Nanami nodded, as though she understood. Youmei smiled like a kindly grandfather as he saw her reaction.

Then, she smiled and said, “I don’t get it.”

“Ah, you foolish woman! I’ve explained so much and you still don’t understand!! Did all your nutrients go to your bosom instead of your

brains?!”

Youmei rapped on Nanami’s head as he scolded her roundly. Nanami rolled around on the floor, clutching her head.

“Noooooooooooo, I, I’m, sorry, But I really don’t get it.”

“Forget it, Professor Youmei. Calm down. There’s hardly any students in this day and age who can understand without a thorough explanation. In addition, this is the first time I’ve encountered the theory of a three-dimensional shadow implying the existence of an extra-dimensional entity.”

“Of course. I just came up with it myself.”

Urushibata and Shirai had nothing to say.

Kuribayashi Nanami had no idea what was going on, and looked at the professors while asking, “What happened?”

After that, a great shout of “What are you going to do if you can’t understand these things by instinct?!” echoed through the mountains of Kunapnui.

The sun went down, and the night filled with darkness.

The investigation party had spent half a day moving around, and they took their dinner together. The menu was the familiar combat rations, and the curry rice which few people disliked.

The stars shone brightly in the clear sky after the rain stopped. However, the ground was still muddy, so there was hardly anywhere to sit. Thus, they used the interior of the Chinook as a dining hall.

Giselle wolfed down the curry rice in the bento box.

“It tastes so good! I love this stuff!”

In an instant, she had finished two to three people’s worth of food.

The girl in the white goth priestess’ outfit sat with her thighs spread on the ground. That – combined with the way she was frantically devouring

her meal – was no longer crude, but had in fact abandoned every shred of femininity. Hardy was a big eater, but at least she had class, the difference between them was like the gap between the heavens and the earth.

The fact that she's so beautiful makes it even more of a shame. Those thoughts ran through Itami's head as he looked toward Yao.

Their eyes met, and she said, "Alright" before Itami could even speak. Then she rose and started to prepare another portion.

Look at her, she can still eat. Heat up another helping, and pour coffee for everyone. That was what Itami had been thinking. But Yao was already in motion before he could speak, so Itami could only watch her, his mouth opening and closing in silence.

"Eh, you can communicate with your eyes? That's pretty amazing, hm~"

Yao smiled in response to Tuka's barb, and proudly patted her chest and the 50 yen coin which hung between it. She had been sighing like it was the end of the world after losing the talisman Rory had given her, so Itami had taken a 50 yen coin from his wallet and given it to her, saying, "This is ten times more powerful than a 5-yen coin". Yao perked up upon seeing the coin; no, in fact, she came to life again.

"I can feel what Youji-dono wants to do from here." Perhaps she was getting carried away.

"Ah, really now? How nice."

"She's even calling him Youji-dono~"

"I think it's time we drew closer to each other, so I've decided to call him that. Ohhh, I can feel it now. Tonight, Youji-dono will have me spend the night with him."

Everyone stared at him, and Itami went, "No, no, it's impossible!"

However, Yao seemed to be humming a tune as she prepared a pouch of combat rations. Then she winked at Itami and said, "You seem quite shy, Youji-dono."

Having seen all this, Rory quietly said to Tuka and Lelei:

“It seems she does not know the difference between her fantasies and reality. We must keep an eye on them tonight.”

“Correct.”

“Understood.”

Itami decided to change the topic to dispel the hostile mood in the air.

“It must be pretty rough being a god’s apostle.”

The spoon heading to Giselle’s mouth froze as she heard what Itami said.

She quietly muttered, “It’s all your fault.”

“Why me?”

“Because of the Dragons. Mistress scolded me because of that. As punishment, I was made to lead you people here to observe the black mist...”

Giselle shrank as she noticed Rory glaring sharply at her, and hurriedly switched to more polite language.

“...That’s what my Mistress said.”

“Did she not give you anything to eat? No rations or supplies?”

“Why would a god worry about how mortals ate? What that means is that people have to feed themselves with their own strength. I ate the grass and hunted animals to begin with. However, all the animals are either dead or gone, so there was no prey for me.”

Giselle turned a teary eye to the side as she said this.

In that direction was the astronomer Shirai, who had set up his telescope and camera. He was currently observing and recording.

“What... on earth is he doing?”

“He apparently wants to record the stars in the night sky,” Yao explained as she topped up Giselle’s curry rice.

The cameraman, who was effectively Kuribayashi Nanami’s partner, was

helping Shirai out, due to the matter falling within his sphere of expertise. Of course, he was filming for media broadcasts at the same time.

Elsewhere, Youmei and Urushibata had set up a camping bed in the cabin of the Chinook and were cheerfully drinking at it. Nanami was holding a 1.8 liter bottle as she interviewed them, alternating between buttering them up and listening to their responses. Everyone else clustered around Youmei and the other academics to learn what they had concluded from their studies.

“Ah, Youmei-san. How do you intend to conduct future investigations?”

Youmei stroked his chin as Urushibata spoke, and then replied, “Umu. First, I shall have to liaise with MECST and arrange for a proper research budget.”

(TL Note: MECST = Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology)

“But do we really have that much time?”

“We do. Granted, if the Apocryph is spreading, we will need to hurry our efforts. If it hints to the Gate being the cause of it, then we must do something about the Gate. That being said, we cannot waste time on things like ‘we’ll worry about it next year’ and so on.”

“Then, can we say this Apocryph stuff appeared because of the Gate?”

Nanami seemed eager for a conclusion, to which Youmei responded, “I cannot honestly say!”

“Don’t you know that the phenomenon of the Gate is one which I am hard-pressed to understand? It is impossible to prove a relationship between two phenomena which have not yet been fully comprehended.”

“So what was the point of this investigation?”

“It was simply to clarify the facts of what has already happened. Analyzing these phenomena will require further study. In a sense, realising that much is a breakthrough in itself.”

“Still, if that’s the case, does that mean there’s no need to close the

Gate?”

“That may be so, but it may not be the case. Deciding on countermeasures lies in the realm of politics. Science may not be able to give a concrete answer, but we can estimate the danger from events on this side, and from there decide on what action to take. Take the Tokai earthquake predictions for example. We do not know exactly when they will strike, but we must still be prepared for them. This is a similar case; right now, all sorts of strange phenomena like the observed stellar displacement, earthquakes and this Apocryph are taking place. From this we can conclude that something must be done. While we do not yet have a clear picture of what is going on, it may be too late to act once we figure it out.”

Urushibata nodded in agreement.

“Indeed. Thus, we must get funding as soon as possible. It would be a great loss to close the Gate without performing further investigations.”

“Oi, Hazama’s boy. Where did the budget for this expedition come from?”

Itami recalled the contents of the expense plan he had read earlier.

“Ah? Oh, it was a special expense from the Special Region resource investigation budget.”

“Good, give the rest to us! We’ll gather all the equipment and recruit all the academics we can find and get to the bottom of this!”

“Please, please hang on a bit. This isn’t something I can decide by myself. I need to discuss it with my supervising off—”

“Don’t give me excuses, give me answers. In my opinion, this investigation will not only advance extra-dimensional theory, but grant new insights into the nature of dark matter. Will it not work if you phrase this as an intellectual resource of the Special Region?”

“Ah, I’ll try that,” Itami replied as he scratched his head.

“This validates the theory of matter which can only be observed as

gravitational distortions...” Urushibata muttered.

“Indeed. If we can prove that this phenomenon is an extra-dimensional shadow, we ought to be able to make a connection with the current theories on dark matter.”

After placing his camera outside, Shirai returned, nodding and saying, “That’s right.”

The thing about long exposure cameras was that they had to be left alone once one opened their shutter, so there was no need for him to actually stand watch over it for the whole duration of the exposure.”

“The presence of matter distorts space, and this distortion can be observed in the form of gravitational phenomena. However, if space is distorted through some other reason, we should be able to measure some kind of gravitational phenomenon even if there is no actual material presence.”

“Space distortion is gravity? What’s that all about?”

Using a gentle tone, Youmei began explaining to the silver-haired girl who had suddenly cut in.

He pulled out a rubber anti-slip mat, and had Shirai and Urushibata help pull it taut, so its surface was flat.

“Over there, tighter... that’s it, that’s right.”

Kurata and the others were intrigued and gathered around the group. At Kuribayashi’s urging ,the cameraman began filming.

“All right? Imagine this is space. As you can see, it is flat and immaculate, with no distortions whatsoever. Now, if there were something with mass here...”

As Youmei said that, he took a grenade from Itami’s vest and placed it on the mat. Itami exclaimed “Ah!” as the old man snatched the grenade away, but the ring had not been pulled out, so he decided to leave things at that.

“Now, do you see how the mat bends in response to the presence of a

mass upon it?”

Indeed, the rubber mat had dimpled inwards where the weight of the grenade rested.

“This depression causes objects to fall down into it. In other words, this depression is called gravity,”

Nanami tilted her head as she listened to Youmei’s explanation. She did not seem to understand. However, Lelei’s eyes lit up, as though she had realised something.

“So objects fall because of this distortion... this well. In other words, if matter exists, it must be accompanied by some amount of gravity.”

“Umu. That’s right.”

This was the moment when the theory of gravity came to this world.

Youmei took out a silver orb from his pocket and tossed it onto the mat.

“Professor, why are you carrying something like that?”

“Pachinko is a science. Sooner or later, I shall devise a strategy for certain victory.”

“Pachinko was only a science 40 years ago when people launched the ball by pulling a handle, right? Now it’s a game of probabilities where the shopkeeper can fiddle with the numbers to do whatever he wants.”

“Your soul is bereft of romance.”

The silver marble ignored Youmei and Urushibata’s conversation and slowly rolled across the mat. Then, it was drawn in by the dimple of the hand grenade and finally collided with it.

“The existence of matter deforms space... so depending on the size of the mass, it would be possible to open a hole in space?”

Youmei smiled as he heard Lelei’s starry-eyed question.

Urushibata began studying Lelei and muttered something along the lines of, “This little lady is quite bright considering her age. I wish I had a student like her.”

“I say, I say, can I bring her back with me?”

Those words were directed at Itami, who replied, “As long as she agrees. Don’t be mistaken; she’s a scholar in this world, and a magician. However, exchange study procedures are a big pain, so she can’t go at short notice.”

“Hoho, so you are a sage of this world and a magician? For the longest time, I have been fascinated by magical phenomena. Why not intern at my laboratory?”

“How sneaky, Professor Youmei. I had my eye on her first.”

“It doesn’t matter who was first. What matters is whose lab suits her best.”

As Youmei kept up that conversation, he removed the grenade and the marble from the rubber mat.

“Now, with nothing there, the surface is flat and without distortions. This represents normal space. Now, if space were distorted for some reason...”

Saying so, Youmei reached under the mat, got a hold of it, and pulled downwards.

The surface of the hitherto flat rubber mat dimpled into a depression.

Youmei rolled the marble in again.

“It is self-evident.”

The marble wobbled over the uneven surface, but it was eventually drawn into the depths of the depression.

“This is why we can observe gravitational phenomena even in the absence of gravity-generating mass.”

“Still, why didn’t we feel anything strange about the gravity when we went there?” Sasagawa asked. Youmei laughed in response.

“That is because the land is massive. The distortion is tiny in comparison; you could say it is like a little wrinkle in the surface. One cannot tell the difference between those with one’s body, you know.”

As Youmei said that, he place the grenade back on the dimpled mat. The depression caused by the weight of the grenade obliterated the depression made by Youmei's hand pulling from underneath.

"Space distortion? I don't get it at all. Kinda weird trying to visualize it with a rubber mat. And what's this about opera-dimensional space and whatnot?"

Youmei snorted at Kurata's response.

"Aye, it's too much to expect for you bumpkins to understand. Wahahahaha!"

After clearing up the mats and returning to their places. Lelei and Nanami continued asking questions of Youmei and Urushibata.

"The problem now is extra-dimensional theory. In the first place, proving its existence is very difficult. We are bound by the X, Y and Z axes and the temporal axis. So I find it nearly impossible to imagine another 'direction' that is different from any of these."

"What else could there be apart from the directions of left, right, up, down, forward, backward, and the flow of time from the past to the future?"

Youmei's face turned bitter in response to Nanami's question.

"I do not know. The mere postulation has taxed me to my limits. Of course, I have some inkling of that, when considering the common points of all the directional axes. But it is merely a theory which I cannot prove."

"Common points?" Nanami asked.

"The X, Y, Z and temporal axes. They extend infinitely in all directions from an arbitrary point P. Thus, three-dimensional space encompasses two-and one-dimensional space, and all this flows along the temporal axis. Thus, any extra-dimensional spaces ought to possess similar properties."

"Yes, that's right," Lelei nodded. "When you phrase it that way, I can understand it."

"What, what did you just say?"

“Magic has always been a procedure which affects the third dimension from the outside.”

“Wait, wait a minute, little miss. You mean to say you understand this?”

Youmei and the others leaned forward.

Lelei nodded. “This is essential knowledge for a magician. Beyond the third dimension is the aether.”

“Aether?”

“That is what we call it,” Lelei explained simply.

“Understood. Please, continue.”

“Very well.”

Lelei began her lecture. Beyond this world were various axes, called aether, sether, kether, feither and so on.

“Saying that they exist outside the three-dimensional world is incorrect. Strictly speaking, they coexist with the third dimension. However, we have no organs with which to sense them, thus we experience them as being beyond us.”

“...Coexist, you say?”

“Correct. The principle which governs the fall of a thrown object in the third dimension can also be used to lift it.”

Lelei demonstrated by levitating a rope in the Chinook’s interior to show them.

“This phenomenon is created by manipulating the ‘false principle’ of sether, which affects the ‘true principle’ of the third dimension. If we use the example of the rubber mat and the marble, this would be like pushing up the marble through the mat, thus causing it to float regardless of gravity.”

“But how can you manipulate sether?”

“Like I said, the third dimension coexists with sether.”

“Assuming they coexist, how can you affect the other side of the

equation?”

“Sether overlaps with this location.”

Despite Lelei’s explanation, Youmei could only shake his head. “I cannot fathom the crux of the argument.”

“The third dimension is encompassed by sether, kether, feither, and so on. They are not separate existences. Thus, sether is here and so is feither.”

“Kuh, I regret to say I understood less than half of that. It would seem I need to sit down and properly ponder this matter. However, I do understand that you have explained certain principles and then demonstrated magical phenomena. I cannot definitely conclude that they are fifth-or sixth-dimensional axes, so I shall set that aside for now. However, there is one thing I wish to verify. I have long considered the existence of an axis called ‘possibility’. What do you think?”

“What do you mean by ‘possibility’?” Lelei asked, to determine the definition he had in mind.

“How shall I say this... in science fiction, they are known as parallel worlds, but how should I explain it...”

Itami – who had overheard this by accident – excitedly raised his hand.

“Isn’t that something like the Planet of the Apes or a world where everyone’s dressed in a different color? Or maybe a world where cities like Fuyuki, Narumi, Nekomi, Tomobiki-machi or Hinata exist?”

(TL Note: Nekomi is the city in which Ah! My Goddess is based. Similarly, Fuyuki = F/SN, Tomobiki = Urusei Yatsura, but I’m not sure what Hinata and Narumi refer to. Also, there is an old joke that monkeys are basically humans with three fewer hairs; hence Planet of the Apes.) Lelei replied: “That is Naurtel, I believe. Within Naurtel, the world is expressed as a line of sorts.”

“That, that would be...”

“Superstring theory?”

Youmei nodded to Shirai.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. Wild speculation would be dangerous.”

“Within the world of Naurtel, these ropes are not alone. One could say that they subdivide infinitely and extend from their source, encompassing the higher and lower dimensions within them.”

Lelei looped the rope before them and brought both strands near each other, so they touched near the middle. Itami and the others realized that this was exactly how Hardy had described it. Lelei planned to explain it in her own way.

“The point at which the two ropes touch is called a Gate. Usually, the Gate opens and closes in an instant.”

Youmei clapped his hands together in that moment.

“I see! So you are saying that when the Gate is held open, both worlds are tangled together?”

Youmei reached out and grabbed the rope, pressing both strands together tightly.

Shirai brought his face near them and said, “I see. So when the Gate is held open, it implies that the worlds are forcibly tangled, so the tension on the lines will continually increase, and it will be stretched...”

“Umu. It might be elastic, but how elastic can it be? The world will warp because of that too...”

The professors tried to explain it in their own words. Nanami could not follow them, and asked them to return to the original topic.

“Then, professors. Do these many worlds really exist?”

“Well, about that... they probably only differ very slightly, on the level of everyone missing just three hairs, from each other and tend to cluster up.”

“Cluster up?”

“Let’s use coin tosses for a comparison. If we want to talk about outcomes, then in addition to coming up heads or tails, you have to

consider that it might end up stopping at a 45 degree angle to the ground, or even a 42 or 40 degree angle. However, under normal circumstances, it will end up either facing heads or tails. This is because the probabilities have clustered in that way... at least, that is how I visualize it. How about that?"

Youmei looked around for approval, but Lelei shook her head.

"I did not quite understand that. Forgive me."

Youmei told her not to worry about it.

"Ignorance is not a sin. To academics like myself, the fact that we do not know things is a powerful impetus to perform research. I have long considered things like why is the separation between the Earth and Venus' orbit the way it is? Why is there no planet between Jupiter and Mars, only an asteroid belt? All these things are the consequence of the gravity of the various planets. Then, I have also considered that a similar phenomenon might exist in the realm of probability. The difference between the realms of probability will not be small, so there will be marked differences between them."

(TL Note: this sounds a lot like Attractor Field Theory from Stein's Gate, or atomic orbital models)

Itami and Nanami could not say anything in response to this.

"It is all right if you plebeians do not understand. However, I feel that this is the reason why our world and the world of the Special Region can coexist. Little miss, your name is Lelei, am I correct? I could use a talented individual like yourself in my laboratory. Come learn the scientific method with me."

Youmei patted Lelei's shoulder as he said that.

Lelei began pondering the problem. It would seem she was considering an internship after exchange studies.

Youmei nodded in satisfaction, and looked back at Kuribayashi.

"Very well, it is now my turn. I am in a good mood today, so I shall

attempt to explain the spatial distortion phenomena in simple language. Surprisingly enough, this is not uncommon in daily life, so explanation will be easy enough. Did you know I experience spatial distortion every day?"

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"Really?"

"Nanami began babbling: "Do you mean places like the Sargasso Sea? The Bermuda Triangle? Are those places really linked to another dimension?"

"Don't conflate this with the contents of trashy tabloids!" Youmei growled as he knuckled Nanami on the head.

"Besides, these other dimensions don't exist! We need a three-dimensional model of space and time in order for us... for matter to exist. We exist within the three-dimensional envelope created by the Big Bang, and we have proven it. Even if there were another side, it would merely be another three-dimensional plane on another probability axis, much like this Special Region!"

Itami raised a hand to suggest an example he could understand more easily.

"Isn't that similar to how video game characters can only exist in computers?"

"A strange example, but an accurate one. These characters are only conscious of the world within the computer. A higher dimension exists outside the computer, but the principles of the higher dimension still apply within it, even if the characters within the computer do not realize it."

"I see," Itami nodded, thinking of an MMO. game.

"Now, let us discuss spatial distortions. For instance, what I believe to be flat land is actually the surface of a massive sphere, so surely it should be spherical, no? However, the sheer size of the sphere means that I am not conscious of that distortion. Similarly, the shortest point between two

points on the Mercator projection of the world is a straight line. However, compressing the surface of a sphere into a two-dimensional projection would distort it, so in truth, the shortest distance between two points is actually a curve.”

Haaah... the audience seemed somewhere between understanding and confusion.

“Still, how can you conclude that space is warped after half a day of investigation?”

In response to Kuribayashi Nanami’s question, Urushibata asked the cameraman if he could replay the day’s footage.

“Sure,” the man said, and he put the video on the monitor LCD screen.

Youmei and Urushibata were fiddling with various sensors, and someone said, “Forward a little”, and the image drew back. Then someone said, “Oh, this is the spot”, and the image stopped.

“We tried a lot of methods, but this was the most direct way.”

Everyone stared at the LCD screen.

They were looking at Urushibata and Youmei measuring how much ground the black mist had covered. They did not know how far it was, but they had already laid out 25 meters’ worth of tape measure.

“Is that it?” Kurata asked.

“I have no idea what this is,” Kuwahara said.

“Please tell us, Professor.”

Youmei ignored Nanami’s question and looked to Lelei.

“Do you understand, little miss?”

Lelei replied in a calm and logical tone.

“If you’re measuring the distance between two points, the measuring rope must be pulled straight. But the measuring rope in the image is bent...”

Lelei looked at Urushibata and Youmei after pointing that out. Sure

enough, the screen showed the straightened measuring tape now formed a gradual curve.

“Precisely. I originally intended it to be perfectly straight. In other words, this tape measure represents the shortest distance between two points. Under normal circumstances, it should be a straight line. However, as you have just seen, it is clearly curved. Why is that? The tape measure was not blown by the wind, nor was it stuck on something.”

Youmei smiled as he said this.

Lelei walked unsteadily into the tent she had been assigned and sat on her bed.

She unconsciously took off her robes and hung them on a hanger, and then hung it onto a spar within the tent. Then she took off her Wyvern-scale armor and draped it on her knees, leaving her in her T-shirt and shorts. Gazing off into the distance, she expelled the heat in her chest with a heavy exhalation.

“Ahhh, what a pain in the ass! I can almost hear Hardy laughing at us!”

Rory took off her black Goth outfit as she uttered words which a member of the clergy should not have spoken.

It was a complex garment of interwoven pieces of fabric held together by knots and ribbons which passed through numerous metal loops. Putting it on and taking it off was very tiresome. However, Rory nimbly undid the ribbons and knots with practiced movements and slid the outfit off. Clad only in her revealing underwear, she plopped herself down on the bed.

“We need to close the Gate before the Apocryph swallows the world. The problem is that not everyone thinks that way.”

Rory began combing her hair.”

“That’s right,” Tuka said. She slid her legs free of her tight-fitting jeans and continued, “There’ll be people who will say that the Apocryph has nothing to do with the Gate. The ALC relies on the Gate for a living, so there’ll be strong opposition.”

“Is that what she meant by watching what humanity would do, that bitch!”

“Wouldn’t anybody want to do something after seeing that?” Yao asked. “If it were me, I would definitely try to settle it once and for all.”

After Rory, Tuka and Yao shared their opinions, they all turned to Lelei.

However, Lelei simply folded up the armor on her knee and replied:

“We can’t convince the people who oppose it. Even if the Gate is closed, it can be opened again.”

“Really?” Tuka and Yao asked in unison.

“The Queen of the Underworld gave me this as payment,” Lelei said as she produced the braid. “By using this, I can open a portal that links worlds.”

“Hang on! If you use that, you’ll become one of Hardy’s minions, Lelei!”

“What is wrong with that?” Lelei – ever logical and thoughtful – replied in an even tone.

After all, she might become a minion of Hardy after drawing on her power, but that did not mean that she would become a worshipper or priest of Hardy, and thus Rory’s enemy.

Regular priests received special abilities by venerating their gods. Under those circumstances, opposing the god who granted them power was heresy. However, Lelei’s body had been hijacked by a god and used for her own purposes, so this was simply power that had been given as a payment – perhaps even as compensation. Thus, even if that power was directed at Hardy, she would not be blamed for it.

That said, to Rory, it was like a relative of hers using a weapon from the enemy, and it deeply displeased her. To all the people of the world, taking that weapon meant aligning themselves with the enemy. If Lelei demonstrated that power, everyone would think that she was a minion of Hardy. Indeed, the problem lay in Rory’s perceptions.

“However, if that happens, won’t the Apocryph appear again?”

Tuka and Rory were caught up on different matters, and they worried about different things.

“Indeed, that is so.”

Rory tried to persuade Lelei to come around, but Lelei banished that worry.

“The solution has already been hinted at. This is happening because the Gate has been left open. If we open it at appropriate times, there will be fewer problems. One might call this a form of protecting the environment. The important thing is not to accumulate distortion.”

“I see. Then, closing the Arnus Gate will not be a problem for the groups who depend on it.”

“There’s a big problem there! Lelei, do you want to live a life of opening and closing the Gate?”

Unlike Tuka and Yao, Lelei was a short-lived human. It would be a shame to use one’s short lifespan as a Gatekeeper.

“I don’t want that either,” Lelei said as she shook her head. She acknowledged that there were a pile of other problems as well.

“We don’t have a way to find Japan from the countless other ways. Without that, we won’t know where to point the portal even if we could open one. In addition, when we close the Gate there’ll be chaos in the Naurtel to relieve the accumulated distortion. There is also a time differential between here and there. It is possible that even if we open the Gate again the next day, another year might have passed over there.”

“That, that’s terrible! Youji would have become an old man and I would already have ascended by then. Isn’t that a terrible thing?” Rory wailed.

Tuka and Yao expressed their agreement.

After that, the hitherto silent Giselle spoke.

“It’s just as Mistress said...”

“What did she say?”

“Mistress said that humans would not be able to reach a conclusion. She said that humanity would not be able to make a decision when their future clashed with their desires. Because of that, the gods have to force a conclusion through disaster.”

“Kuh,” Rory moaned in despair.

“Onee-sama, you should know what you have to do.”

Suddenly, Lelei’s hand stopped. It was small, but she noticed a hole in the material of her armor.

She thought about it, and then continued in a stern tone.

“...Youji will not be a problem. We will lock him up when the time comes to close the Gate. I’m certain the Japanese government will trade him as a condition of opening the Gate again. Because of that, being able to open and close the Gate is a priority, and I hope I will be the only one to do this. I hope everyone here will give me their full cooperation.”

Lelei laughed coldly, with a perfectly flat expression on her face.

As they saw her like this, Rory, Tuka, Yao and even Giselle could not help but lean back.

They felt a chill down the spine from that emotionless smile on her face.

“What?”

What? It sounded like that. Rory and the others shook their heads while saying, “No, it’s nothing~”

The hole Lelei had discovered in her armor was not a round bullet hole punched through it, but a slit, like a buttonhole. It was roughly big enough to admit her index finger. When she flipped it over, the scales on the breastplate were not damaged. Why was there a hole like this? How surprising.

Still, this was not the work of a smith, but the production of the children of Arnus. It might have been made with Wyvern scales, but they had used the small, irregularly shaped or damaged scales which could not be solid. Sometimes, one would find small gaps depending on the way it was worn.

The fact was that the hole in the garment looked like it had passed through the gap in the scales.

When had that hole appeared? Lelei tilted her head and rummaged through her luggage, and took out a needle and string.

“Ah, Lelei-dono? If that is the case, I feel you will be in grave danger, Lelei-dono.”

Looking back, she saw that Piña was speaking, and Hamilton was combing the Crown Princess’ red hair.

“Why is that?”

“Because you will be drawn into the schemes of the Empire and the Japanese. At the very least, if Zorzal-niisama hears about this, your life will be in danger again.”

From Zorzal’s point of view, being able to close the Gate implied that Japan had given up on plundering the world on this side of the Gate and had retreated, so it would be a wonderful thing. It would be even better if the Gate could not be opened again. Naturally, if someone had the power to open the Gate, he would hate them. If that person were Hardy, Goddess of the Underworld, he would not be able to do anything about it, but it would be a different matter if that person were human.

“We cannot keep this secret.”

Lelei began sewing the hole in her clothes as she replied.

“Why is that...” Piña asked Lelei.

“This is because being able to reopen the Gate is the precondition that the Japanese government and everyone at Arnus will have for accepting even a temporary closure of the Gate. Without that, everyone will oppose it. There won’t even be room for negotiations.”

Piña knew she could not persuade them by herself, so she looked around for someone to help her. However, Tuka and Yao merely shook their heads in silence.

Rory was feeling quite miserable too. Hardy had already foreseen things

would develop this way, which was why she had given Lelei that power. She could sense that Hardy wanted to make Lelei the eye of the storm as she threw the dice around her.”

“The official government of the Empire would certainly be against it. Even if we could open the Gate again afterwards, Father... His Majesty would certainly decree that the Gate not be closed. Even I would once have opposed the closing of the Gate.”

“Why is that?”

Hamilton raised her head and answered Tuka’s question.

“This is because the military power of Japan, quartered as they are in Arnus, is critical for the survival of the official administration at Italica. Even if we were certain that the Gate could be opened again, the blank period where we would be deprived of Japan’s military might during the closure of the Gate would be unacceptable. It is a matter of life and death for us. Anyone who had been through the purges would be begging Japan not to abandon them.”

“Are the Empire and Japan still at war? Aren’t they getting along quite well?”

“Please understand. The situation has changed.”

“Then how about killing Zorzal directly?”

Rory hoisted her halberd, feeling that that would be a very simple solution.

“Your Holiness. If you do that, Father will be the next to take Lelei-dono’s life. The official government feels that Japan is necessary due to the power of Onii-sama’s power. Without him, Japan will be a hindrance to the Empire. So defeating Zorzal only means he will be replaced by Father, and defeating Father will only mean he will be replaced by someone else, and they will all attempt to assassinate Lelei-dono. This is a matter of circumstances, not because they are Onii-sama or Father.”

“Then why not have Emperor Molt abdicate and become Empress, Piña?”

“Please give me a break. I have long tired of politics. If I became Empress, then I would be the one to have to make the decision to eliminate Lelei-dono. And besides, I hope you won’t force me to do something I don’t want to do.”

Piña sounded very depressed as she said this.

“What a headache,” Rory grouched, as though to speak for everyone else.

“Dammit, Hardy. How dare you repay kindness with treachery...”

From Rory’s point of view, Lelei had been singled out for her abilities. Since the person who had singled her out was Hardy, it was more like the goddess had cursed her. However, Lelei did not seem bothered by this at all as she said: “What else is there to be perplexed about?”

“What else... Lelei-dono, did you hear what we said just now? This is a matter of your life and death.”

“That’s fine. Youji will protect me. He will help me.”

Tuka laughed unhappily at this.

“Haha, so was that your objective? You’ve been spoiled ever since he protected you in Londel.”

Lelei nodded gently to Tuka.

“As I thought.”

“I will not deny that. I do not deny it, but that is not all.”

“So it’s to keep Youji here by force?”

“I don’t think Father will abandon me and go back to the other side if my life is in danger.”

“I’m certain of it. If Youji won’t help me, there must be some reason for it. It must be a painful decision, made after weighing me against something even more important.”

“Still, just assuming, if things get to that extent, what happens?”

“I die with grace. That is all a wife can do.”

Lelei's face blushed a faint pink as she continued stitching.

Rory, Tuka and Yao looked at each other, muttering things like, "She's amazingly reliable," "Lelei's a breathtaking woman" and so on.

Perhaps she had not realized it, but Lelei muttered, "What? I'm heavy?"

It would seem she did not quite get the meaning of the phrase.

(TL Note: Breathtaking woman derives from 重い女, one who gives everything for her man when she falls in love. At heart, the base word 重い refers to weight.) "Come to think of it Lelei, what have you been doing since just now?"

"I'm mending a hole. Mending holes is important."

"Eh?!"

They had been talking about holes (portals) for some time now, but Rory leaned forward to inspect the movements of the needle in Lelei's hand.

Then, her eyes shot open, and her gaze shifted from Lelei's hand to her chest.

"...W-what?"

Rory suddenly reached out and lifted up Lelei's T-shirt, gazing from her flat tummy to the faint swell of her breasts to the skin near her throat. This savagery was only possible within the women's tent.

"W-what? What? What?!"

Lelei pushed away Rory's hands in a panic. Her protestations were also a form of inquiry – what on earth are you doing? However, after sliding her fingertips along Lelei's pure white skin to verify that she was unharmed, her lips curled up into a wicked, smug smile.

"Don't you think it's... gotten bigger?"

"...Eh, eh h h h h h?!" Lelei yelped as she covered up her chest.

She had not noticed earlier, but Hardy's gluttonous binge might well have wrought havoc on Lelei's figure. The others had called her a breathtaking woman. What exactly did that mean? If that were the case,

she had to do something about it immediately.

Lelei privately resolved to go on a diet.

Elsewhere, the existence of the Apocryph had a major impact on Itami and the other JSDF servicemen.

They knew the appropriate countermeasure was to close the Gate, but everyone here had worked hard to build relationships with the people of the Special Region. It was not something they could accept by saying, “Oh, so that’s how it is huh?”

“El-tee, what should we do?”

“What do you mean, what should we do?”

Itami was reading manga on his folding bed, and he was starting to find Kurata very annoying.

“If the Gate closes, can we live here?”

However, the next thing that entered his ears wiped that all away.

“What, what the hell did you just say?”

Itami bolted upright, studying the earnest look on his subordinate’s face.

“Ah, well, actually, I, uh, I’ve got a good thing going with Persia-san...”

“Oi oi, are you imagining things? It would be bad if you ended up becoming a stalker because you got the wrong impression from her.”

“No, we’re pretty much in a relationship now.”

“There are girls who don’t want to be tied down by bonds, and they tend to have one-night stands because of that.”

“That’s fine, because she’s not that kind of girl.”

This conversation took place within the same tent, so their words reached everyone else even if they did not want to hear it. Katsumoto and Sasagawa cheered, while Kuwabara smiled bitterly.

“Not bad, not bad at all! Woohoo!”

“It’s technically a violation of the regs... so don’t go spreading it around.”

In response to this defeatist talk, Kurata replied, “Hey, I put effort into it too.”

Everyone could attest to that. Every time he went down to Italica, he sought her out and wrote letters to her.

“Still, you... you’re really willing to migrate to the Special Region from Japan for a woman? Are you going to resign from the JSDF? What will your family think?”

“Well, I don’t want to quit, and I’ll miss Japan. But I can’t bear the thought of not being able to meet her again.”

“Ohhhh! That’s Kurata for you. Well done!” Katsumoto enthused.

“Well, I have to take my hat off to you. You’ve taken your love for nekomimi that far, after all,” Sasagawa chimed in.

However, Kuwabara injected a dose of reality into the proceedings.

“How will you make a living here if you quit the JSDF? If you get married, if you live together, how will you provide for your partner?”

The words, “I’ll get married after this”, “We’ll have a kid after this” and so on were strictly forbidden in 3rd Recon. Thus, everyone was careful not to use those kinds of words “How about signing on with House Formal? I’m sure I can apply my knowledge from Japan in things like domestic matters or the military. Maybe if I could spread what I know in a pioneer village or something...”

Itami halted Kurata mid-sentence.

“Well, that won’t work. Things aren’t that simple.”

“Why?”

“For instance, there are the JOCV (Japanese Overseas Cooperation Volunteers), experienced and skilled people who have a long history of helping out in developing countries in Africa, East Asia, South America and so on. But do you know how much time and effort it took for them to get those results? Seeding the fields, building irrigation systems, even tilling the fields took a long time period of encouraging and lecturing the

natives and making them understand the concepts behind them. If you go in with the attitude that all you need for irrigation is to dig a ditch, you'll be finished. The water source will soon be clogged up by sand and rocks. The reason why volunteer groups in Afghanistan and the Middle East have so much success is because they have incredible willpower, and not because it's profitable to do so. It's an incredibly bad investment. Nothing at all like what you might have read in web novels about pioneering and survival."

"El, el-tee... you really thought this through, huh."

"Ah, how shall I put this... I've already considered what you're thinking about."

"Ahahahaha, as I thought."

"I did some research into it. What I learned was that it was too much for an amateur like me."

"Still, the Arnus Living Community did it."

"That's because they adhered to the universal principle of buying low and selling high and had good products to trade. They managed to grow their business by making the most of the special privileges afforded to them. It's nothing special in the Special Region, and the traders did not need to change their thinking. Thus, the world at large could take it in. There's people who want to become instant millionaires by playing with stocks and market prices, but people will view hoarding or exchanging large amounts of currency as troublemaking, so that's not sustainable, is it?"

"Ah, yeah."

"I'm not telling you not to migrate. Do it if you want. But you should sit down and calmly think about your strengths and talents. If you throw yourself into this because you're in love with a woman, you'll most likely regret it. Mar... no, putting your chop on a form isn't the end. Life after that will be hard, and your relationship might even end because of that."

"As expected of a divorcee, your words drip with wisdom."

“I was pretty shocked back then,” Itami sighed.

“You’ll get burned if you think you’re unstoppable just because the Special Region is backward. Don’t look down on them.”

“Understood. Still, you’ve thought heavily about this. As expected of you, el-tee.”

“It’s because I once said, ‘It’s fine, leave it to me’ or something like that. I felt that it was important to make sure that there was a way for the refugees to continue living even without me around, which is why I thought so much about it.”

“Eh? Aren’t you staying in the Special Region, el-tee?”

“And why would I do that?”

“I mean... you’ve got the black Goth loli, the blonde Elf, the magical girl... oh, and even the Crown Princess joined in too. From an outsider’s point of view, they all look pretty serious.”

“Ahhh, well, I guess you’re right. I need to think about it.”

“Think about it... el-tee, things being what they are, do you even have the luxury of thinking about it? Do you think you can run away?”

“I can’t?”

“Definitely not.”

Kurata and the others nodded. Even old man Kuwabara nodded.

“No way.”

“But I didn’t lay my hands on any of them.”

“Even if you didn’t do anything, if the girl gets serious about you, you have to take responsibility for it.”

“Responsibility? I didn’t even do anything!”

“Aye. Still, this is what they mean by strict liability.”

The way he described it sounded like a traffic accident.

“But I’ve been divorced before.”

“What difference does that make?”

“That means anyone who knows my true nature will run for the hills.”

In response to Itami’s self-deprecation, Katsumoto gulped and asked, “Don’t, don’t tell me you think the others don’t know who you really are?”

Sasagawa mumbled, “It’s obvious enough that they completely understand you. The hell are you saying, normalfag? Hurry up and drown already!”

“Ah? Drown? Me? Why?”

“You should be drowning in women. Hurry up and blow your damn bubbles as you sink!”

“Oi, oi, you guys are taking this too far.”

“El-tee, you’re the one who’s gone too far.”

Yes, it’s him, Kurata and the others seemed to say as they looked to each other and nodded in unison.

“Why?”

“Why? Let’s take that blonde Elf for example. How come she’s so sweet on you?”

“So you think she loves me because I helped her, like some kind of H-game? You’re being too naive. Tuka isn’t an easy woman like that. Sadly, I think she can only be at peace when she thinks of me as her father. If I wound up in a relationship with her because of that, the friendship we’ve built so far will go down the drain.”

“How about the platinum blonde Dark Elf?”

“Yao is my servant, so it’s different from that sort of thing. If not, how could I end up with such a good woman? Taking advantage of our relationship would be a form of abuse of authority.”

“Then, the magical girl?”

“Lelei is naive and romantic. She must be confused, like measles. If I were to take advantage of that, could I even consider myself an adult? Plus,

how could such a smart girl be satisfied with me? She'd get tired of me in no time."

"How about the black Goth loli?"

"Laying hands on Rory is a crime, isn't it? If we were in Japan, there's no doubt that I'd be charged with violating the Child Welfare Act and the Youth Protection Ordinances. Well, her real age being what it is, the authorities probably won't convict me... but I still have to consider my public image. Maybe if she looked a little older..."

"I see..." Kurata nodded. "Then, el-tee? If say, we were to go after one of those four, what would you do?"

"Going by cliches, I would transfer the person in question to the 4th Brigade. How about that?"

"To the frontline?"

The men looked at each other, convening a silent tribunal.

"What, what's wrong with you guys?"

"Please be quiet, el-tee. Court is in session."

Soon, they seem to have reached a conclusion. Kurata was the first to speak.

"El-tee, put an end to it. The greatest sin for someone like you is being indecisive."

"That's right, that's right. Please show me your strength in going out with all four of them at once," Katsumoto added.

"If you assert yourself a bit more, you could end up with a harem. A harem," Sasagawa said.

Itami's men patted his shoulders as he said this.

"The shift change is coming soon..."

Since she was female, they had selected Kurokawa to take one of the earlier watches. The next man up on sentry detail would be called just before the first one ended. Usually sentries were posted in pairs, and the

other member of this pair was one of the airmen.

“Oh, I’m up next.”

Kurata reached for his rifle as he put on his boots.

Sensing something in the air, Kurokawa asked Itami: “What’s wrong?”

“Ahh, see how much we’ve been talking about the Gate? Well, what comes next is going to be pretty troublesome.”

Since he could not actually speak the truth, Itami decided to try and bluff his way through. However, Kurokawa continued in her usual tone, “Indeed. But El-tee? Do you really think you can run away from that problem?”

Chapter 4



After abandoning the Imperial Capital, Zorzal moved the Regency to the second largest Imperial city, Telta. With that as his base of operations, he devoted his energy to the administration of the Empire. Or at least... he did his best.

“My father, Emperor Molt, is currently recovering under my care. Do not believe the rumors which state that he has fled to Italica. All of these are lies spread by Piña and the pro-peace faction of the former Senate. Naturally, the rumors that I have been removed from the succession and Piña Co Lada has been designated Crown Princess are utterly baseless and without foundation. I am certain your lordships are aware of this, but I must impress that fact upon you once more. I am the Crown Prince and the true heir to His Majesty, and it is my hand which will rule the Empire. I pray you distinguished gentlemen will not forget that fact.”

Tyuule transcribed Zorzal’s words.

The quill pen danced gracefully over the surface of the parchment. The document she produced was like unto a work of art.

However, the artistic value of the piece was ruined instantly when Zorzal put his ugly signature upon it.

After reading it again and ensuring the ink was dry, he rolled up the parchment.

He tied it up with a ribbon, and put a blob of flame-softened wax upon it before stamping it with his seal.

“Alright! Send this to King Duran of the Elbe Kingdom immediately.”

Zorzal personally handed the letter to a waiting soldier as he gave that order.

The messenger responded with a rousing affirmative, then placed his fist over his heart in salute before rushing out of Zorzal’s office.

“However, King Duran wants to continue keeping the Empire at arm’s length. Will he really obey us?”

This worry came from Upson, the Chief Law Officer. He was a man who could be considered Zorzal’s confidante in political matters.

“No, but it will be fine if he does not join us, as long as he does not join the pro-peace faction. Once things settle down, we will let him know that we do things differently from Emperor Molt. After some persuasion, he

will return to the fold.”

After saying that, Zorzal commenced his next round of dictation. Tyuule prepared a fresh sheet of parchment to copy it down.

“The next one goes to Provincial Governor Carpo... Hm... I am very pleased with your loyalty to the Empire. However, the trust engendered by that loyalty has been greatly shaken of late. It disturbs me to have to suspect a vassal’s loyalty, but you have not gathered the required troops and beasts to date, nor have you given a reason for this shortfall. If you have the required troops but have delayed in dispatching them, I hope you will send them out with all due haste. If the delay comes from the gathering of monsters, there is no need to fear rebuke. Send whatever you have to me as soon as possible.”

“Writing something like that will let them know we are in dire straits,” Upson mentioned in response to Zorzal’s dictation.

“It’s hardly a big deal. The fact is, we are in dire straits. The Empire is at war. Perhaps they aren’t sending their men over because they think we still have manpower.”

“However, if it is too obvious that we are having difficulty, it may disgrace us and run the risk of our provinces seceding. Thus, I urge you to hint that disobedience will be punished with death as treachery deserves, or something similar.”

“Is that so. Well, yes, that’s right... how would you say it?”

“Are my subordinates... the newly-assigned Oprichniki giving their all? Do you think asking them in this manner would be good enough?”

“Alright, we’ll go with that.”

Zorzal observed Tyuule work from nearby, and indicated where she should insert those words from just now. Then, he covered his face and sighed theatrically, like an actor in a tragedy.

“Ahhhh! To think I would have to make enemies of Arnus and Italica at the same time...”

Ever since the self-proclaimed official administration and pro-peace faction had taken root in Italica, the guerilla campaign against the JSDF could not develop as he had hoped.

Of course, this was not because General Helm was a poor commander.

His tactic of burdening the Japanese troops with refugees which needed food and shelter, and then attacking them when they had trouble maneuvering had been very effective.

Seeding Imperial troops disguised as refugees behind enemy lines to cause havoc and destruction had worked many times.

However, once the pro-peace faction got to work, they had largely abandoned these operations.

This was because the pro-peace faction did not care how many villages were burned and how many refugees appeared.

The troops of the pro-peace faction ignored the refugees created by the scorched-earth tactics, intent as they were on taking the Imperial Capital. Zorzal might have announced that he was abandoning it, but the Imperial Capital was still the Imperial Capital. If he sat idly by and let them take it, the power and influence of the pro-peace faction would only grow. In order to prevent this, he had to build a fortress between Italica and the pro-peace faction, which would require the allocation of manpower over a long duration.

And of course, troops which had to build a base and defend it were hardly guerillas.

Once their base of operations were known, one could predict their lines of advance and staging areas. They would lose the advantages of stealth and formlessness.

Thus, they could do little but inconvenience the JSDF of late. Assaulting them with hordes of monsters was not very effective due to the losses such efforts had incurred. In addition, their guerillas' bases had been exposed and were gradually being wiped out. Of course, they were establishing new bases at the same time, but the rate of construction was

roughly equal to the rate of destruction, so they were at a stalemate.

“Could there be an intelligence leak somewhere?”

Zorzal could not help but look around. Nei, the head manservant, shook his head to indicate that it was not himself.

However, the present situation implied that an enemy spy had made their way into this place. Otherwise, why had all his efforts ended in failure or without meaningful results?

At the very least, he had to learn about the enemy’s situation.

With that thread of hope, Zorzal asked Tyuule: “How are the spies we have sent to Italica? If we can throw them into chaos even once, we can dissuade others from joining them.”

However, Tyuule’s head and bunny ears drooped powerlessly, as though apologizing.

“My deepest apologies. We keep losing our men to no effect. The reason is unclear, but they are exposed the instant they enter Chateau Formal. In addition, our staging areas within Italica have been attacked by the enemy and are being whittled away.”

Zorzal grabbed his head and combed his fingers through his hair.

“It’s the same there too, huh... If even that doesn’t work, then it’s clear. The enemy’s methods far surpass mine.”

“That is quite a shame. However, I have been discussing the matter of delivering a stroke of vengeance with Upson-sama.”

As she said that, a knock rang out from the door of his office. Zorzal indicated that Tyuule should hold her tongue, and looked to the door.

“Enter.”

Furuta entered the office. As usual, he was holding his lunch basket.

“Ohh, is it mealtime again? Don’t worry, come quickly...”

As usual, Furuta laid the lunch basket and a pot on Zorzal’s table. Zorzal continued the conversation with Tyuule that he had interrupted.

“Is it the matter of using the Nihon prisoner as bait? How are the preparations for that?”

Upon the Chief Law Officer replied, “Yes. We have stationed troops at Tanska.”

“So we’re starting there? Alright, I’ll look forward to the results. Have some good news for me next time.”

“You seem quite tired.”

Furuta opened the lunch basket and set out a bowl in front of Zorzal.

“So you could tell. The fact is, I haven’t been able to sleep well at night.”

“Your appetite seems to have decreased as well.”

“You... seems like you know me better than my doctors.”

Judging by the black rings around his eyes, it was plain to anyone that he was not in the best shape. However, Zorzal described it like a special skill of Furuta’s. It would seem that no one had told Zorzal about how his face looked.

“I do look forward to opening that pot. What will it hold today?”

Zorzal took off the lid and peered inside.

“Cheh, what the hell is this? Food for invalids?”

Inside the pot was a porridge made from vegetables and wheat boiled in animal milk. There were chunks of meat inside, but Zorzal looked quite disappointed.

“Do you feel like it’s food for sick people?”

“You mean it isn’t?”

“Please, try some.”

Zorzal took a spoonful of the porridge that Furuta was scooping into a bowl. He liked the taste and smacked his lips before sighing, “What is this taste... I’ve never had porridge like this before.”

“I spent two days cooking animal bones for their marrow, and then I

boiled it down into a stock. I simmered it in milk without boiling it, and then used it to cook grain before adding it to a soup. After that, I added rock salt to taste. It looks like hospital food, but I feel that it qualifies as high-class cuisine.”

“Ah, this is delicious.”

Zorzal polished off the bowl’s contents in an instant. He then stuck his spoon into the pot, as though to demand more.

“Ah... Tyuule-san’s share is in there.”

“Crap, I did it without thinking. Well, that’s your fault too, Furuta, for making such good food. How shall I punish you for that? I know, off with his head!”

The air froze.

Nobody had expected Zorzal to consider delicious food a bad thing. Everyone turned pale and went silent, not knowing what to do.

“I was just kidding. Wasn’t it funny?” Zorzal said as he looked around.

The people around him laughed sheepishly. Forced laughter rang through the Prince Regent’s office.

“You, you scared me.”

Furuta patted his chest, with a panicked look on his face.

“Looks like I can’t even crack jokes nowadays.”

“Your Highness wields power, after all. All we can do is read your mood and obey. Has nobody talked to you about your condition?”

“Was it that obvious?” Zorzal muttered as he touched his face. “No, nobody’s brought it up at all. Ah, you’re frank enough, but that’s only when it comes to food. Nobody around me talks about policy or the like.”

“Ah, well, that’s because I am careful and do not compromise when it comes to food.”

“Good. You do that. Keep it up.”

“Yes, understood. Ah, yes, Tyuule-san’s portion is in the kitchen. I shall

fetch it immediately.”

“Ahhh, go then. I’ll help myself to this. Can’t let people say I don’t have an appetite any more.”

Saying this, Zorzal munched on a chunk of meat floating in the porridge.”

“Umu, this is offal. I really like this squishy texture.”

Zorzal emptied the bowl as he expounded his opinion on its contents.

After leaving the Crown Prince’s office, Furuta sensed someone following him and halted in his tracks.

The corridor to the kitchen was empty. Thus, he could hear someone behind him even as he strode rapidly along it.

Looking back, he saw Miss Tyuule jogging up.

“Wait!”

“What is it?” Furuta asked the panting Warrior Bunny.

“His Highness commanded me to bring another portion. He said that pot was not enough for him. What a startling appetite.”

“Is that so? I think he’s pushing himself... but if he likes it, that’s hardly a bad thing.”

After saying that, Furuta planned to head for the kitchen. However, Tyuule – who should have been done after delivering her message – did not seem to have any intention of leaving. This made him wonder if something had happened.

“Yes?”

“His Highness would be offended if the contents of the cookpot were spilled and there wasn’t enough left over. Therefore, I’ll go with you.”

With that, Tyuule advanced to Furuta’s side.

There was no need to worry about the pot being spilled or whatever, but

Furuta decided not to refuse her.

The two of them walked shoulder to shoulder in silence for a time.

Suddenly, Furuta felt eyes on him and looked over to Tyuule. However, she averted her gaze, as though panicked, and faced forward. Then, in a cold tone, she said to Furuta, "What..."

"No, it's nothing."

"Quit staring at me, you lecher."



Saying so, Tyuule hurriedly rearranged her clothes, as though to cover up her chest.

While his intentions were not the slightest bit lewd, the way in which she covered herself up had the opposite effect of drawing Furuta's attention to how revealing her bunnygirl outfit appeared.

“I wasn’t looking.”

“Liar. You were staring.”

“No – wait, weren’t you the one staring at me, Tyuule-san?”

“Don’t be foolish! Why do I have to look at you, anyway?”

...But you were staring all this while?! Furuta originally intended to shoot that back at her, but he decided to let things go and give in to Tyuule.

“Is that so. I must have made a mistake. I’m sorry.”

“That’s right, you should be.”

“I feel bad about it. Please forgive me.”

Furuta lowered his head to her, hoping to settle the matter. However, Tyuule did not intend to drop it just like that.

“No. I can’t let you off the hook.”

“Then... what can I do for you to forgive me? Shall I listen to you speak like before?”

A look of panic came over Tyuule and she pointed at Furuta.

“Did-didn’t I tell you to forget about that?!”

“Yes, yes you did. I’ll forget it. In fact, I’ve already forgotten!”

The fact was, Tyuule had once complained to Furuta.

It had happened after abandoning the Imperial Capital, on the road to Telta. There had been nothing to do besides travel, so they had talked the entire day.

Perhaps it was because Tyuule had never bared her soul to someone else, but she had a lot pent up inside her. And then, because Furuta – who did not say anything, but listened while grunting – was there, her words spilled out like a fish finding water, and she told him everything.

Why was she here? She had come to save her home and her people. However, her people had turned around and looked at her as a traitor. It was unreasonable. It was cruel. Far too cruel. She had been through so

much misery up till now. Why was it that only other people had been saved? Why had nobody reached a helping hand out to her? She was angry. She was frustrated... and so on.

Unable to stop herself, she let everything out. While she managed to refrain from mentioning things which might get her in trouble, apart from that... no, it was because she had to hide those things that she spoke of everything else, including those things which made her blush.

The next day, she grabbed her head and agonized about why she had said all that to him? The feeling that she could not let him live clashed with the knowledge that she could not lose someone who was willing to quietly listen to her. It was a complex mixture of love and hate.

Ever since then, Tyuule had taken to hanging around Furuta every chance she got.

Part of that was because she was alert against the possibility of Furuta talking about what she had shared. Another part was because she wanted to see how Furuta would react upon learning about her. Her self-doubt made her wonder if he would think of her as a fool, and of course, she wanted to continue venting her heart to him. All these emotions blended together and had expressed themselves in this course of action.

“Tell me about yourself this time. I can listen to you.”

“Why must I talk about that?”

“...This, uh, that, it's, because of his Highness! That's right, his Highness is interested in the shop you plan to open. He wants to know about it.”

What is she panicking about? Furuta smiled as he thought that.

“It can't be helped, then. Where shall I begin?”

“In the past, you told me about how you quarrelled with your employer and wound up getting fired from your shop. And then, there's your dream, the part about setting up a shop and opening it somewhere. However, can you tell me in more detail? I need something concrete.”

“Concrete?”

“Like say, what kind of workers you’re going to employ and so on!”

Furuta tilted his head. What exactly was so critical that he had to try so hard?

“Haa...”

In any event, they could not talk while standing in the corridor. He returned to the kitchen, and then put the pot containing Tyuule’s lunch and the share Zorzal had requested on the boil.

Tyuule remained one step behind Furuta and continued speaking to him.

“What sort of girls will you employ?”

“The criteria are the same as what I told you earlier.”

“I want to know in more detail. There are girls like Melda or Nidi here, right? Do you like any of them?”

The names Tyuule mentioned belonged to the human female slaves who worked in and around the kitchen.

“Let me think... hm~”

“Hurry, hurry up!”

“I guess in the end, I’d still want someone like you, Tyuule-san.”

“Muh-muh-m-m-me?!”

“Yes. While I’ve trained in other restaurants before, I seem to have a pretty good affinity with the food of this region. Thus, it would make sense to use the local food as a selling point, no? If that were the case, then being able to have someone like yourself to build atmosphere would be ideal, Tyuule-san.”

If one served Chinese food, one would hire Chinese staff, much as one would employ Indians when serving Indian food, or French service personnel when producing French cuisine. It played to the customers’ expectations. Thus, Furuta felt that if he used the Special Region’s ingredients to prepare food, it would only be fitting to employ demihumans. However, Tyuule seemed to have interpreted Furuta’s words

differently.

She twisted back and forth, hugging herself in embarrassment. “Awawawa... Is, is that really okay?! No, I’m his Highness’ plaything and slave. How could I do that?”

She waved her hands frantically as she said this.

“Still, I think someone like yourself would be ideal, Tyuule-san. You’re capable and efficient, and there’s no faulting the way you receive guests. That being said, someone of your caliber would be like a rare flower growing on a cliffside. Where could I find someone like that...”

The fact was that someone like Tyuule would thrive in the corporate or government sector. People with her abilities would not be content to languish in a small shop as a waitress. Muttering this, Furuta wondered if it was hopeless.

“It’s not like that!”

However, for some reason, Tyuule suddenly pouted in displeasure. Startled by her sudden change in mood, Furuta took half a step back.

“W-what is it?”

“If you want a woman, you can’t just declare that you can’t do it. You need to keep asking and trying! Maybe if you bow and scrape and beg enough, she might say ‘Ah, what shall I do with you, I should probably consider it since you’ve gone this far’ and then reluctantly agree!”

“You say that, but I also need to see if it’ll inconvenience her.”

“That, that, that, that’s just being weak. If you want her, you need the guts to just go up and carry her off on your shoulder!”

“Isn’t that like kidnapping a bride?! I’m just hiring an employee – why do I have to go that far?”

“Do you even have to ask? Your shop is your kingdom! So the person running your shop will be your queen! What’s there to be said if you don’t even have the courage to marry her? Women! Women judge a man’s sincerity by how far they’ll go and when they’ll abandon their pride for the

things they want!”

Somehow, the conversation had gone from hiring a hostess to the matter of a shopkeeper.

That said, at the scale Furuta envisioned, it was perfectly appropriate to have the shopkeeper double as a hostess. Thus, he did not quibble about the details. What Furuta had in mind was a small eating place, which could survive perfectly fine with just a single chef and a single hostess.

“But, ah, a lot of these small restaurants are run by a husband and wife couple.”

“Hus...husband and wife?!”

Furuta went about his own things as Tyuule flushed bright red for some reason. Then, with a “Here we go”, he handed a basket with a warm pot in it to Tyuule.

“What, what’s this?”

“Want to help me with it?”

Furuta handed Tyuule a basket with meat in it. Said meat would be going into the porridge.

“All, alright. I’ll give you a hand,” Tyuule replied as she nervously picked up the basket.

“But, I hope you’ll keep all this a secret from his Highness.”

“...Yes. I can’t report these mundane things to him. And it’s unrealistic. It’s a dream, nothing more.”

“Mun-mundane, you say...”

So becoming a shopkeeper is mundane, and top of that, it’s just a dream... Furuta felt slightly hurt by that.

The two of them returned to the Crown Prince’s office along the corridor. They did not restart their interrupted conversation. Perhaps they had grown tired of tangling over it from just now, so they did not bring up anything else, but walked in mutual silence.

Neither of them looked at the other. Then, in the moment before turning the corner to Zorzal's office, the two of them unconsciously halted.

Tyuule seemed to hesitate for a moment, but in the end she decided to speak.

"Well... do you have any weaknesses?"

"Ah?! What do you mean? In what sense?"

"I can't calm down. You know about me, but I don't understand you. It makes me feel restless and uneasy. I want to believe that you're not that sort of person, but I don't know you well enough to trust you to that extent. So I'm worried about whether or not you'll blab about what I told you. Therefore, I want to learn something about you that will convince me that you will keep my secret safe. Is there anything like that?"

"Is that the reason why you've been bugging me all this time?"

"Yes. I may have been beating about the bush, but I do want to learn about that sort of thing."

"Is it really okay for you to ask me directly?"

"You said that if I needed any help, I could come to you, right? You said you'd help me, right? So help me! Help me think of a way to deal with my unease!"

As she said that, Tyuule punched Furuta's chest.

That blow did not hurt, but its impact could not be measured in pain. It was not that Tyuule was displeased with him, and after seeing her pleading face, Furuta could not help but think, "What will I do with her".

"That's true. Hm~"

Furuta thought, and then he brought his mouth near Tyuule's face... well, her bunny ears.

"If I said I were a kancho... no, in the words of this place, that would be a spy, what would you do?"

"Eh?!"

Tyuule's brown eyes went wide in shock, and she stumbled back.

"No, no way..."

Furuta took the basket Tyuule was holding and said, "Then, I'll be heading off first."

He left for Zorzal's office, leaving Tyuule leaning against a wall, touching her lips in contemplation.

"Tyuule-sama..."

A voice came from somewhere. It belonged to Bouro.

"What a surprise. He was the last person I would expect to be a spy."

Tyuule and Bouro suspected the people around them, much like Zorzal did.

Furuta was naturally one of those people. But his daily actions and speech meant that he was one of the first to be stricken off the list of possible suspects.

Most spies minded their language and activities in order not to draw attention or be kicked out of the organizations they had infiltrated. In contrast, Furuta had stood up to Zorzal. His attitude was such that he would probably have been fired if not for Zorzal's sudden surges of generosity. No spy would do that, and nobody would actually come out and say that they were a spy.

"Tyuule-sama."

"What is it?"

"We have moved Matsui Fuyuki. What shall we do next?"

"Has the information been leaked?"

"If that man is a spy as he claims, then the enemy will know as well."

"Good... Then, carry on as planned."

"If Furuta is an enemy spy, then the enemy will not come. Nobody would walk into clear and present danger. Is that what you mean?"

“Which is why we cannot have any leaks, even if it means not clearing this up.”

“Understood. I shall engrave it into my heart. If the enemy comes, we shall defeat and capture them... However...”

“What is it?”

“Would it not be better for you if that Furuta was an enemy spy, Tyuule-sama? It would seem more interesting.”

“Indeed. The fact that someone with Zorzal’s favor is an enemy agent would be deliciously ironic. But this operation has to succeed. After all, repeated failures will only anger his Highness. In addition, we need information on the enemy, so we will need a prisoner or two.”

“Understood. Then, please pray that Furuta was lying, and await my report.”

With that, Bouro’s presence vanished.

“An interesting name came up.”

As he stood in front of Zorzal’s office, Furuta had one finger on his bone conduction earpiece and another on his throat mike.

“I guessed as much but Tyuule-san...”

“Bouro, that’s the name of the enemy spies’ ringleader. Just telling us that he’s involved with Zorzal’s woman is a big accomplishment.”

Furuta furrowed his brows in annoyance. He did not like how Yanagida referred to Tyuule as “Zorzal’s woman”. Perhaps he was unconsciously feeling protective towards her.

“Given the conversation just now, Tyuule-san isn’t serving Zorzal of her own will.”

“Maybe, but what she’s doing now is of her own will. In other words, she has no choice but to ambush us.”

“That may be so.”

Thanks to the microphone he had planted on Tyuule while he had declared himself to be a spy, Furuta had picked up everything that had passed between Tyuule and Bouro. That transmission had passed through repeater stations situated all over and ultimately reached the Special Region Expedition Force Italica Operations Center, located under Chateau Formal.

There, they gathered information and coordinated counter-intelligence and espionage operations.

“Umu,” nodded Yanagida, the commanding officer there.

“Then, the question now is what should we do.”

Rescuing the kidnapped victims was the utmost priority for the JSDF – for Japan. Even if it was a trap, they still had to walk into it.

“That said, even so, still... having to fight an entire legion is quite troublesome.”

As Yanagida pressed on his earpiece, he withdrew a bundle of maps from a pile of documents on his desk. Several other maps rustled as they fell to the ground, but he eventually found the topographical map of the area called Tanska, which Furuta had mentioned.

“So, are we terminating the operation?”

If they did that, it would confirm that Furuta was a spy in Tyuule’s eyes. This would put him in danger, so he would have to terminate the operation and flee back to Arnus.

In all honesty, that might be better for Furuta. The fact was that his dangerous confession just now was made with the thought that, “if my mission ends like this, great”. However, this had instead brought Tyuule and Bouro’s collaboration and their treachery towards Zorzal to the surface. Yanagida would never let that chance go.

“No, this is an opportunity of sorts. You’ll have to stay there for a while and keep an eye on that Tyuule woman. We’ll think of something.”

“So you’re going to stick your hand into the woodchipper, then?”

“Ah, yes. Whether it’s a sneak attack or a full-on offensive, it’ll be much harder if the defenders see us coming and set an ambush. It's not like how it is in Hollywood movies. Still, as long as we have a way out, it won’t be so bad. Forget it, we can’t discuss this here anyway. Let me know if anything else comes up.”

The most important element in unconventional warfare was surprise, which would throw the enemy’s command structure, intelligence apparatus and operations into chaos. A successful operation revolved around exploiting the element of surprise while accomplishing all their objectives and then retreating.

However, an enemy which was expecting an attack would quickly recover from confusion.

They had to assume their routes of access and egress would be patrolled and trapped. They could break through by force, but that would lead to greater losses and waste precious time.

After re-establishing their chain of command, the enemy would soon overwhelm the friendly forces with sheer weight of numbers. Because of that, operations like these emphasized operational security and accurate intelligence within the area of operations. The execution demanded swiftness and a secure axis of retreat.

Japan was overwhelmingly superior to the Special Region in terms of weaponry, communications, mobility, and so on. However, relying solely on these factors was little more than assuming that everything would go one’s way. If that were the case, they would be little different from the Imperial Japanese Army of the past, whose staff officers were “incompetent zealots”. Their coordination would be poor, their battlefield judgement would be poor, their advantage in weaponry would swiftly be overcome through the enemy’s effective usage of their troops, and they would proceed on the road toward the worst case of defeat.

In addition, the unspoken rule of dealing with surprise attacks was swift recovery from chaos, which necessitated swift orders given with split-second timing. Rather than saying “I need to make sure, hang on,” what

was needed was more along the lines of “Do this now!”

After ending his conversation with Furuta, Yanagida leaned back in his wheelchair, going “hmm” as he pondered how to successfully rescue the kidnapped victim.

Initially, they had planned to exfiltrate by land.

However, if the enemy had set an ambush for them, he had to assume that the way out was sealed off. Knowing that, he would have to turn the ambush against them. He had to do something they did not expect.

That being the case, they would need to evacuate by air, but that was not workable for the time being for various reasons.

The wheels of his chair clattered as Yanagida rolled himself backwards. He reached for a drawer in the corner of the room.

What he took out was a schedule of Chinook flights.

Their limited number of helicopters were being used around the clock in operations to clean up Zorzal’s guerillas. The pilots were being overworked, so even if he suddenly requisitioned them, they would not be at their best condition.

Rescuing the kidnapped victim was a very high priority, but supporting the teams in combat with the Imperial guerillas was also a high priority. Thus, the initial plan had been to retreat by land.

“...Going there is easy, but returning is hard, huh?”

(TL Note: Yanagida quotes a nursery rhyme, “行きはよいよい 帰りは怖い”, which basically means “no problems going there but coming back is scary”) Humming the tune to himself, he reached out to the phone.

“Is this AS? This is Yanagida from GS. Thank you for your helping us all this while. Look, I’ve got a request for you. Something urgent’s come up and I need you to send in a Phantom for aerial recon. The details are a little complicated, so I’d like you to keep this quiet... ah, leave that to me. Drinks will be on me next time. Ah, my health? I’m fine, my condition has improved a lot recently. Thanks.”

(TL Note: AS = JASDF, GS = JGSDF)

Yanagida hung up, and then dialled another number.

“Yanagida here. Can you think of a way to get me a Chinook? If I’m not wrong, there’s one about to go in for maintenance, right? Could you push it back a little... eh? They’ve already taken out the engine? Well, that’s a pain. Are there any idle Chinooks? How could that be...”

Yanagida hung up and then pressed at his furrowed brow with his fingertips.

“...Don’t tell me we’ll have to insert and then think of something?”

He traced the schedule with his fingertips once more, and then he discovered a Chinook slot with a blank space on it.

“What’s this... it’s idling there and will return to base once the mission’s complete. That means it’s not active at the moment. Who’s being so wasteful... and where the hell is Kunapnui?”

Yanagida looked around for a map. Then, he realised that the map he was looking for had fallen under the table, so he reached down for it. However, even with all his effort, it was difficult to pick up something from the ground while sitting on a wheelchair. When he reached out for it again, a pale and heavily-scarred hand extended over his shoulder and picked up the map.

“Is this alright, Master Yanagida?”

“...Ah, Delilah, it’s you.”

She had approached him silently from behind.

Her arms encircled Yanagida’s neck gently from behind.

“You should have just told me. Please use me as you desire.”

“Hmph. I don’t intend to have the person who made me like this look after me.”

“Ah! I’m sorry, forgive me, please!”

Delilah plastered herself to Yanagida’s face. He went “Ahhhh, stop

hugging me whenever you feel like it, it's too hot" and tried to work a hand between them to push her away.

A vaguely resentful expression appeared on Delilah's face, but she obediently complied with Yanagida's order.

"Well, if you put it that way, then the bed would be even hotter," Delilah said as she chewed on her thumbnail.

Yanagida bellowed, "Didn't I tell you before that there's a time and place for all this?!" before laying the map onto the table.

"Ah, they're in the same area, right? So if we can have them detour a little on the way back, we can have them pick up the operations team... alright, I've got some confidence now."

"This operation is targeted at the people I found in the enemy's hideout, right?"

"Correct."

"You should praise me, then. I fought hard with that Nora girl, but she got away in the end."

"No. I'm sorry, but I can't praise you."

"Why?!" Was it false information?

"No, worse than that. It's an enemy trap."

"But, but how?! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry."

Delilah put her hands together and lowered her head.

"Still, the bait they're using is genuine. Therefore, our plan is to go in, knowing that it's a trap."

Delilah's eyes seemed to glow as she heard Yanagida.

"Let me go too, then. I'll fix the enemy up real good."

"Of course. The situation may have gotten a bit worse, but I have to let you handle this, no matter what."

With that, Yanagida picked up the phone and dialled a number.

“Is that General Hazama? This is Yanagida.”

The investigation was scheduled for three days. When it was over, Itami and the others broke camp and left Kunapnui.

The sky was clear, unlike how it had been when they arrived.

Perhaps it was because they were leaving the gloomy atmosphere and black mist of that place behind, but their hearts seemed to rise with the helicopter.

“...That’s why we need to detour a little on the way back.”

At that moment, Itami was briefing his men and the civilians about the change of plans.

“I take it that this is a matter of supreme exigency, since a detour is required while we gentlemen are onboard?”

Professor Youmei was the first to speak.

“Yes, pretty much.”

“Then, where will we be going, el-tee?”

In response to Kuwahara’s question, Itami replied, “Tanska. They say they need us to extract an ops team.”

He sounded like it had nothing to do with him at all.

“You mean, there might be combat?”

Kuwahara and Kurata leaned forward, as though to say, “Are you kidding me?”

“They’re mounting a rescue operation for one of the kidnap victims from the Imperial invasion. This Chinook will take her and the operations team back to Arnus.”

“Ohhh!”

At this, Kuribayashi Nanami’s and her cameraman’s eyes lit up.

“So this rescue operation could be big news, then?! Director’s Prize-level big?!”

“That would be nice,” Kurokawa said as she began hanging up intravenous infusion bags inside the Chinook’s cabin.

“Your Highness, Hamilton-sama, can I count on your help for this?”

“So the enemy will be Zorzal-niisan’s men? I understand. You have our blades.”

Itami decided to summarize things.

“Therefore, despite the great inconvenience this will cause, I hope you will forgive this detour of ours.

Youmei folded his arms and replied, “Ohhh~ Well, if this is a rescue operation, then it cannot be helped. Allow us to be of assistance.”

“No, no, it’s not important enough to trouble you gents with.”

“What are you saying? How can we, as fellow Japanese, sit by and watch? We shall show you the meaning of intelligent battle.”

“No, like I was saying, there’s no need for you to fight.”

Ignoring Itami and Youmei’s debate, Tuka drew her composite bow and began her preparations. Similarly, Yao took out her bowstave and began to string it. Lelei pulled a bundle of brass funnels from her bag.

“That... Lelei-chan. What are those for? Are these weapons, perhaps?”

With no idea what those funnels were for, Kurata could not help but ask.



“They’re used like this.”

Lelei quietly incanted a monophonic verse, and dozens of funnels rose into the air around her.

“Could, could it be, those are fa—”

“Wait wait wait, Kurata! Funnels. They’re funnels! Don’t use the English

name!” Itami shouted, trying to drown out Kurata’s voice.

<TL Note: Funnels, as in the drone weapons from Gundam. This joke loses a lot in translation.> “Ohh, it surprises me every time I see it. Indeed, this is magic.”

Youmei and Urushibata gasped in awe at the phenomenon Lelei had invoked.

For some reason, Rory had a bullying expression on her face as she spoke to the Apostle of Hardy sitting opposite her and said: “There’ll be fighting. Jealous? Want to take part?”

Rory was overjoyed. One would expect nothing less of the Apostle of a god of war. She was fidgety and excited, as though a long-awaited party was about to begin. Then again, if Giselle answered “I want to fight”, Rory would glare at her with a look that said, “So you’re trying to steal my fun, huh?!”

“Ah, no. I won’t be taking part. I’ll just watch...”

Perhaps that was why Giselle swiftly lowered her head after answering.

A large river flowed into Lake Ses, and the name of the region at the river’s mouth was Tanska.

The upstream region of the river was called Messe, and the area further up was called Guera. There were four deltas near the river’s mouth called Emera, Muse, Tuin and Nekki, all linked by suspension bridges. Round logs had been hammered into the riverbed to form a wooden fence of sorts, becoming a dam-fortress which prevented access by land or water.

Still, despite being called a fortress, it was not a work of masonry like the Empire commonly built. While its key structural components were shored up with blocks of stone, its walls were made of wood, a substandard building material. The Empire did not count it as a fortress, because to them, a fortress had to be a permanent structure built entirely out of stone.

Wood was used for temporary fortifications in the field. These circumstantial structures were not called fortresses, but castra.

That said, Tanska was an exception to the rule, and was designated as a fortress.

The reason for that was because it had originally been designed as a sturdy fort of stone. Large quantities of stones and masons to work them had been brought in to begin construction.

And then, one day, it all sank into the ground. This was not an exaggeration or a figure of speech; the earth literally swallowed up the construction site.

From the start, the Empire knew that sandbars were loosely packed. Thus, they had used the finest woodworking technology to lay the highest-quality foundations possible as a prelude to construction. Well, at least, it should have been.

However, the fortress under construction had sunk like a boat. In a matter of days, what should have been a two-storey building became a one-storey building.

The storey that remained above the ground was in danger of sinking as well.

The panicked masons and Imperial troops hurriedly tore down the walls and stairs to reduce the weight of the structure. By the time the sinking had stopped, only the roofs and pillars were left.

Naturally, this could not even be used as a field camp, much less a fortress.

Thus, they had erected wooden palisades between the pillars, using slapdash methods normally reserved for temporary field camps.

This implied that Tanska was greatly flawed as a defensive measure. Naturally, one's mind would immediately turn to blaming the people responsible. However, the nobles responsible began spreading the message that, "This fortress is expected to manage the crossing of traffic across the River Ses. Thus, there is little need for walls and no need to view this deficiency as a problem".

There was also a subtext to the effect of "after investing large amounts

of money into the project, simply abandoning it would be a terrible waste". However, everyone agreed that the important thing was to avoid blame for this debacle. This sort of thing was not uncommon in the Empire, and those nobles insisted that "Despite all of this, Tanska is still fully functional". The excuse passed, and the administration began calling it as a fortress.

"Godasen-kakka, the Prince Regent has orders for you."

Godasen – who was responsible for managing the region around Lake Ses from his seat in Tanska – opened the letter he had just received from Telta and swiftly scanned through it.

"And you are?"

"Sir, this one is Dulles. I am an Oprichnik."

Dulles had two men with him, wearing kobold masks which were identical to his. The two of them placed their fists over their hearts in salute to Godasen.

"So according to this letter, I am to take further instructions from you?"

Dulles removed his kobold mask and explained the details of the operation to Godasen.

Their objective was to use the Nihon prisoner as bait to capture a Japanese covert ops commander and/or destroy their troops, thus reducing their combat ability. In addition, they were to learn more about the enemy's organization.

"I've heard that before, but I opposed it."

"This one understands, but this is a direct order."

"I know that. I also know that his Highness has entrusted a valuable legion to my command. But why must we put ourselves at risk?"

"Please understand, we need to learn more about the enemy's covert ops planning and command structure."

"Covert operations, huh... I don't like it."

“Well, there’s no liking or disliking this, is there? One has to fight hard behind the scenes to ensure victory in an official engagement. This is business as usual.”

“I know that as well, of course. But please allow me to share my opinions.”

As Godasen and Oprichnik Dulles left the office, the former complained, “You’re underestimating the enemy.”

“Is that your opinion?”

Dulles was warning Godasen that his words might be taken as denouncing the Crown Prince, and if he went on, he might be subject to a purge.

“Of course. What else can you take away from it?”

Once they left the building, they could see the cage with the Japanese person in it. Godasen looked inside and snorted in disgust.

“...You’ve brought a plague on my house. If the Japanese know you’ve got this man here, the Japanese will burn with furious anger and kill their way here.”

“This one expects them to do so. We’re looking forward to it.”

“I don’t know how that’ll turn out.”

After that, Godasen ordered the Japanese prisoner to be taken to a basement in Muse. Soldiers carried the wooden cage away.

“Your Excellency. This one opposes the storage of the bait underground. The enemy might not come if they do not know where he is hidden.”

“Then why not put him in the middle of the central plaza and show him to one and all?”

“An excellent idea. The guard on him will be doubled, of course.”

“It shall be so.”

A singularly disinterested Godasen altered his orders, indicating that the bait should be displayed in Muse’s central plaza.

“Well ,as long as it works.”

“Speaking of which – have you fought the Japanese before, your Excellency?”

“Ahh, yes. There was nothing we could do. It was a miserable defeat.”

“However, we will not continue to lose. With General Helm’s tactics, the tide is slowly turning. In addition, I hear that a new kind of magic has been discovered. It seems to be a revolutionary form of magic; with it, we will be able to fight them.”

“The explosion magic, I believe? I remember they reported it in Londel, and it’s under heavy scrutiny. Given that it was used to fell the Flame Dragon, its power is beyond reproach. However, it is a technique that is very difficult to control. While magicians everywhere are studying it, few have been able to master it.”

“You have attempted it, then?”

“Ah, yes. But no matter what I do, I can’t create more than two light rings. One needs at least five to be of any use.”

“If you can create five rings, I pray you will return to the legion.”

“Forget it. The days of magicians making war are long over. If we throw explosion magic back and forth, wars will become even more scary than before.”

“All wars are frightening.”

Godasen thought back on the battle he had most recently participated in, and nodded.

“Indeed.”

“Alright, all troops to alert status now! We don’t know when the enemy will attack us.”

After receiving Godasen’s orders, the relays set off at once. The clatter of metal rang through the fortress as men ran back and forth to their

assigned locations.

“Have the launches patrol the river to solidify our defense. The enemy might come from the sky as well. Be watchful in all directions.”

After that, a man saluted him and said, “Commander! Shall we keep an eye on the ground as well?”

Godasen grimaced, as though he had been punched in the ribs. Before long, he nodded heavily.

“It’s quite likely. Be careful!”

Following that, the men glanced down, and backed off as one.

“Air, underground, water... pay attention to all of these places! Don’t slack off if you don’t want to die!”

And so, with sentries everywhere and the river festooned with triplines connected to alarms, the troops took turns placing their ears to the ground, listening carefully for anything strange. This was their alert posture.

“You said you disliked this, but you’re oddly enthusiastic now,” Dulles noted with approval.

“My opinion is my opinion. The mission is the mission. That said, I must do what I have to do.”

“Well said. His Highness will appreciate that.”

“That is conditional on the success of this operation. At the very least, I don’t want a failure here to be blamed on me slacking off.”

“I do not think the operation will fail, given the fighting strength here. Do you feel otherwise?”

“Who knows? All plans start with the assumption of victory. But during the execution phase, the possibility of defeat arises. Oprichnik Dulles, why do you think this is the case?”

“A lack of valor and fighting spirit. Without the will to attain victory, defeat is certain.”

“That I haven’t heard before. Defeat is due to a lack of will?”

“What other reason could there be? Then, what do you think the reason is?”

“Who knows? Battles sometimes turn on luck and opportunities, no? Sometimes the plan itself is flawed, for all we know.”

“Is that not the second time you have said this?”

“Did I? Or did you misunderstand me?”

“That may be so. I must have been mistaken. However, I feel that such comments about the Crown Prince, who sanctioned this operation, cannot be permitted.”

“I see. In other words, the burden of failure must fall on the man at the scene?”

“Yes. That is so. That is why we Oprichniki are here.”

Dulles nodded, his belief shining in his eyes as he said so.

Credits

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